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Moorey, Gerard (2014) Aging, Death, and Revival: Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels. *Popular Music and Society*, 37 (1). pp. 65-84. doi:10.1080/03007766.2012.726036

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.726036>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.726036>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/1290>

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Moorey, Gerard (2014). *Aging, Death, and Revival: Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels*. *Popular Music and Society*, 37 (1) 65-84. ISSN 0300-7766

Published in *Popular Music and Society*, and available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03007766.2012.726036>

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.726036>

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Aging, Death, and Revival:

Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels

Gerard Moorey

*This article examines the passing of the rock ideology: the system of distinctions and stratifications whereby popular music was classified and argued over in terms of its cultural value and authenticity. It does this by analyzing parallel representations of the music industry in two contemporary novels: Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). Both novels suggest that rock culture and the ideology underpinning it are finally nearing their end or, what amounts to much the same thing, have undergone such a radical transformation in recent years as to be unrecognizable.*

In the popular press of the last couple of decades, any number of emergent cultural and artistic forms have been casually granted the epithet “the new rock and roll”.¹ But what happens to rock and roll itself once it has become “old”? This is the question asked in two acclaimed novels, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) by Jennifer Egan, both of which mark the passage into the second decade of the new millennium. By alighting on characters who are intimately connected with the music industry, either as musicians or as talent scouts and promoters, both novelists examine the passing of what, in broad terms, might be called “the rock era”. This is to

say, they chart the decline and fall of “rock” not so much as a discrete style of music, or even as a meta-genre (Fabbri), but rather as an ideology: a system of distinctions and stratifications whereby popular music is classified and argued over in terms of its cultural value and authenticity. As Keir Keightley comments, “Taking popular music seriously, as something ‘more’ than mere entertainment or distraction, has been a crucial feature of rock culture since its emergence” (110). It is precisely this endowment of seriousness to popular music that Egan’s and Franzen’s novels question, not in order to disparage or discredit popular music – at least, not chiefly in order to do this – but instead to re-think its taken-for-granted centrality in the cultural life of Western societies since at least the end of World War II. In their different ways, what both novelists do is to present us with a world – our own – in which music is no longer as important as it once was.

The Rock Novel

Freedom and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* stand towards the end of an ever-growing line of novels about rock music.² Don DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street* (1972) was a distinguished early attempt to bring a serious novelistic treatment to bear on rock music and the music industry. Looking back, it is noticeable how few rock novels were published in the wake of DeLillo’s groundbreaking but flawed novel compared to those that have been published in the last two decades, i.e. the decades immediately before and after the turn of the millennium. One notices too that rock music has begun to attract the attention of a greater number of serious novelists such as Salman Rushdie, Franzen, and Egan, rather than being confined to pulp-ish accounts of cocaine-fuelled excess.³ In a sense, the rock novel has come of age while rock music itself has grown old. This recent

burgeoning of the rock novel suggests that popular music enjoys increasing legitimacy as a choice of subject matter, this no doubt being symptomatic of a “postmodern” leveling of distinctions between “high” and “low” culture. This trend also results from the fact that popular music has, to some extent, matured and stabilized, becoming a more tangible object of study, no longer subject to quite the same mercurial shifts of taste and fashion that it once was.

Very much like rock music itself, the rock novel now has its own canon, heritage, and traditions, as well as its own stereotypes and clichés. (Reclusive rock stars, for example, figure very prominently in the genre.) The rock novel is, of course, a subset of a larger category of novels about music more generally, including those about classical music such as Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947) and Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* (1999), which have portrayed to great effect the inner turmoil of composers and musicians. The rock novel has its own sub-genres, such as those that deal specifically with the music industry. It is to this sub-group that Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* could be said to belong though both are about a good deal besides. Novels about the music industry, like all literary descriptions, are literally silent when it comes to the music itself, in that music defies translation into words – or into any other medium for that matter. Such novels can, however, detail the complex mediation that occurs between art and commerce, artist and audience, self-expression and conformity, etc. They are also able to illuminate the inner workings of the industry: not just the inner lives of musicians, though this is an important part of their appeal, but also the complex, often chaotic relations that exist between those working together in the industry.

Egan and Franzen are both celebrated authors and are contemporary challengers in the quest for the Great American Novel. In 2010, Franzen became the first author in a decade to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine just as *Freedom*, his long-awaited follow-up to 2001's *The Corrections*, was being published. Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* was awarded the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It is significant that in the same year, 2010, two such distinguished authors published novels in which music features very prominently. Both novelists can clearly be seen to be responding to recent changes in the music industry, not least digitization and the growth of the internet as the main medium via which music is distributed and consumed. In a broader sense, both novelists use the music industry as a prismatic means of examining the broader social world. Egan and Franzen invoke the history of popular music and the music industry in order to explore themes of aging, mid-life crisis, obsolescence, nostalgia, and regret, and, more concretely, they focus on rock music in order to unpick the legacy bequeathed by the baby-boomer generation, who have played a crucial though not uncontested role in post-1945 popular culture.

Generations X, Y, Z (and A) and the “Death” of Rock

As mentioned above, Egan and Franzen both suggest that music no longer has the same centrality in the cultural life of Western societies as it once had and that this is linked to the rise of media platforms in which music is relegated to a supporting role. The claim made by each of their novels is that, in spite of an ever-widening range and variety of music becoming available, popular music is no longer accorded the same ideological weight that it once was. For a provisional explanation of popular music's diminished

importance, one can look at how both *Freedom* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* detail the emergence of what has somewhat problematically come to be known as “generation Y”: the optimistic, health-conscious, consumerist successors to the antagonistic, nihilistic, and self-destructive generation X-ers. Egan goes so far as to posit what might be called “generation Z” (or “generation A” depending on how you wish to divide these things up); the final chapters of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are set in the near future of the 2020s, a world bestrode by “handset employees” such as Lulu, a woman in her early twenties who is able to juggle life as “a graduate student at Barnard” while simultaneously working full-time as a publicist for an aging record company executive. In the eyes of the generation before hers, “She was ‘clean’: no piercings, tattoos or scarifications. All the kids were now. And who could blame them, . . . after watching three generations of flaccid tattoos droop like moth-eaten upholstery over poorly stuffed biceps and saggy asses?” (Egan 325). There is a sense here of the curtailing in our approximate era of those spectacular youth movements that had been oriented, in large part, around popular music, and had manifested an oppositional stance towards mainstream parental culture through specifically subcultural modes of consumption (Cohen; Hebdige). In Franzen’s *Freedom*, the former frontman of a 1980s post-punk band, Richard Katz, seethes with anger as he surveys the crowd of youngsters at a “Bright Eyes” gig that he has been talked into attending:

The nation was fighting ugly ground wars in two countries, the planet was heating up like a toaster oven, and here at the 9:30 [club], all around him, were hundreds of kids . . . with their sweet yearnings, their innocent

entitlement – to what? To emotion. To unadulterated worship of a superspecial band. To being left to themselves to ritually repudiate, for an hour or two on a Saturday night, the cynicism and anger of their elders. They seemed...to bear malice toward nobody. Katz could see it in their clothing, which bespoke none of the rage and disaffection of the crowds he'd been a part of as a youngster. They gathered not in anger but in celebration of their having found, as a generation, a gentler and more respectful way of being. A way, not incidentally, more in harmony with consuming. (Franzen 369)

Significantly, in Franzen's novel, the initiation of two members of this younger generation – whom Katz feels so distant from – into sex and rock and roll (though not drugs) is simultaneously a wholehearted embrace of capitalism. The “mutual deflowering” of teenage neighbors Joey Berglund and Connie Monaghan is soundtracked by U2's *Achtung Baby*: “The opening track, in which Bono avowed that he was ready for everything, ready for the *push*, had been their love song to each other and to capitalism. The song had made Joey feel ready to have sex, ready to step out of childhood, ready to make some real money selling watches at Connie's Catholic school” (412-3). In this example, the counter-cultural notion of rock music as a genre with anti-capitalist and collectivist pretensions – emerging, however, in the late 1960s and early 1970s firmly within the cash nexus – is dispensed with once and for all by a generation who no longer share this ideology.

At a superficial level, one might surmise that both authors present a declinist view of popular music, one in which an allegedly pristine creative practice becomes mired in commercialism and mediocrity, and in which contemporary popular music is found wanting in comparison with the music of earlier decades. As will be seen, however, Egan and Franzen's depiction of the culture of popular music is more sophisticated than this. It would be more accurate to say that they display a studied ambivalence with regard to the question of popular music's decline, simultaneously contributing to and critiquing the long-standing narrative of the imminent or already-accomplished demise of rock and roll (Dettmar). Instead of a definitive "death" of rock and an accompanying collapse of the music industry, both authors suggest a tentative rebirth, although on more modest and sober terms. Significantly, this is a "rebirth" in which the rock ideology – rock as oppositional, anti-commercial, liberating, etc. – is largely absent.

"We Pretended Rock Was the Scourge of Conformity and Consumerism":

Representations of the Music Industry in *Freedom*

Freedom is, in one respect, a family saga spanning three generations, but is more sharply focused on the love triangle that emerges between Walter and Patty Berglund and the musician Richard Katz, who had been Walter's roommate at college, where Walter also met Patty (and Patty met Richard). The vicissitudes of Richard's career as a lead vocalist and guitarist, first with his post-punk band the Traumatix, and later with an alt-country outfit called Walnut Surprise, serves as a temporal chart of the passage from early adulthood to middle age and its accompanying musical soundtrack. References to musical artists are often used in order to gauge some of the tectonic shifts that have occurred in

musical culture, especially with regard to the position occupied by music in the lives of Americans and other Westerners. As Egan does in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Franzen uses popular music in *Freedom* as a complex sociological marker. This is partly a matter of who listens to what. Thus, Richard's and Walter's tastes run the gamut of alternative rock and anything else considered sufficiently "original" and "authentic"; Patty, for her part, listens to country music – not just the "vintage" artists such as Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, Roy Orbison, and Johnny Cash that her husband Walter approves of, but singers like Garth Brooks and the Dixie Chicks too, "never tir[ing] of cheating men and strong women and the indomitable human spirit" (151); by contrast, Walter and Patty's daughter Jessica listens to "world music, especially African and South American" (354), whereas their son Joey likes Tupac and Eminem. More significant than *Freedom*'s use of musical taste as an indicator of social position and temperament is the way in which Franzen reflects on the changing role of music in Western societies in order to reflect more widely on complex social and cultural changes, which music and the music industry have, almost of necessity, been entwined with.

The first of the novel's main music-related episodes occurs when Patty goes to one of Richard's gigs, where she meets her future husband, Walter. The midweek show by Richard's band, the Traumatiks, is also attended by Patty's roommate Eliza whom Richard is dating – or more precisely, having sex and taking cocaine with. The meeting of the two sets of college roommates gives rise to an undertow of mutual antagonism and "morbid" competition between them, especially between Patty and Eliza (in relation to the love-object of Richard), and between Walter and Richard (with regard to Patty), and between Eliza and Walter (in terms of their access to and intimacy with Richard) (71).

The theme of competitiveness runs through the entire novel, emerging as a contradiction within liberal ideology and, as such, a curtailment on the ‘freedom’ that is the novel’s title. In other words, competition is a founding tenet of liberal economics and the self-determination that is alleged to arise from it but, in its extreme form, this very same competitive principle threatens to undermine the political consensus and social cohesion that would make a liberal vision of the good life sustainable. This theme of competitiveness as both enabling and disabling is played out in relation to Richard’s career as a musician, and in Walter’s amalgam of encouragement and jealousy that arise in response to Richard’s changing fortunes. Throughout the novel, Richard comes across as an anti-competitor in his disdain for the music industry, though Walter later suspects that, with “his secret musical agenda”, Richard has been playing the long game, “keeping his eyes on the prize” by shoring up reserves of credibility that have belatedly secured him critical acclaim and commercial success of a kind denied to Walter in his fields of endeavor (186).

When we first encounter Richard’s music in the novel, he is a young and exuberant though not especially skilled stage performer, his band the Traumatiks doing a support slot for the Buzzcocks at a local venue:

Richard was more of a showman than he came to be later, when it seemed clear that he was never going to be a star and so it was better to be an anti-star. He bounced on his toes, did lurching little half pirouettes with his hand on the neck of his guitar, and so forth. He informed the audience that he and his band was going to play every song it knew, and that this

would take twenty-five minutes. Then he and the band went totally haywire, churning out a vicious assault of noise. (72)

Just prior to the Traumatics' performance, Patty, the sports jock for whom it is her first ever gig, is dismayed by "how ugly everything on the stage looked": "The naked cords, and the cold chrome of the drums, and the utilitarian mikes, and the kidnapper's duct tape, and the cannonlike spotlights: it all looked so hard core" (71). Midway through a song called "I hate sunshine", she makes a hasty flight for the exit.

The incidental detail that Richard's band are supporting the Buzzcocks is just one of many (post-)punk references in the early part of the novel. More broadly, such popular music references are part of the novel's meticulous evocation of social history. In a manner that parallels Egan's approach in *Goon Squad*, Franzen makes punk and new wave the focus of the early part of the novel in order to establish Richard and Walter as characters who are fundamentally in revolt against mainstream/parental culture so that the quietist tenor of the generation that follows theirs is all the more striking. To a large extent, it is Richard's friendship with Walter that gives his songs a politically-oriented framework, a way of bringing his lyrics and attitude to bear on the social issues of the time.

Some fifteen years or so later, when Patty attends another Traumatics gig, it is a very different Richard Katz that we meet onstage. (Her attendance with Walter at the gig comes as part of one of Richard's fleeting visits to the now-married couple – "the Berglunds" – and their two children, while Richard is touring) (145). Though nominally the headline act, the Traumatics are left with only "thirty die-hard...fans" once the

support act's "late-adolescent friends [have] seeped out of the club" (143). For Patty, "It was finally sinking in, with both her and Walter, that in spite of being a good musician and a good writer Richard was not having the best life: had not actually been kidding with all his self-deprecation and avowals of admiration and envy of her and Walter" (ibid.). On their way home from the gig, Walter and Patty speculate about which one of the girls in the support act Richard was going to hit on. The cliché of the sexually-voracious rock singer takes on an unexpected poignancy throughout the novel as it emerges that sexual conquests are, for Richard, a retreat from intimacy rather than a fulfillment of it, the expression of a residual misogyny that only Patty, in his fondness for her, is exempt from. Through his drug-use too, Richard is the embodiment of the rock and roll lifestyle, though it should be stated that the characterization in the novel is so nuanced and sophisticated that Richard is never allowed to become merely a cipher for "rock". In spite of this multifaceted characterization, it could be said that Richard, as the embodiment of rock music, enacts the ambivalence of rock in regard to one of the novel's overarching themes: the tension between self-indulgence and altruism. This tension was inherent in the construction of rock music in that it was founded upon the dual myths of individual hedonism and collective identity. This explains the thwarting of Richard's desire, derived from Walter, to be "a good person": his selfishness and competitiveness, especially with regard to sexual adventures, sporadically makes him put himself before those he genuinely loves – most obviously, Walter, but also Patty too. This tension is played out against the wider backdrop of Western liberalism, in particular the Smithian notion of enlightened self-interest being a social good. Arguably, this is a contradiction that liberalism – as well as rock music – is incapable of resolving. Earlier in the novel,

when Walter and Richard are still roommates at college, they rehearse for Patty a discussion they've been having about the limits of liberal democracy (a discussion that will resound throughout the latter part of the novel when Walter begins to pursue seriously his goals as an ecologist and political activist):

“Richard’s excited about Margaret Thatcher,” Walter said. “He thinks she represents the excesses of capitalism that will inevitably lead to its self-destruction. I’m guessing he’s writing a love song.”

...“Walter thinks the liberal state can self-correct,” Richard said. “He thinks the American bourgeoisie will voluntarily accept increasing restrictions on its personal freedoms.” (101-2)

It is only in the alt-country phase of Richard’s career – a mournful melancholic stage, a lament for the passing of, and disillusionment with, the rock myth of collective identity through individual acts of hedonism – that Richard begins to resolve this contradiction between altruism and self-indulgence in his life, though this is achieved more by the expression of regret than anything more proactive and positive. In other words, the novel mourns the passing of the “rock” era in an extended sense, mourning too the notion that bourgeois liberalism can, in Richard’s skeptical words, “self-correct”, i.e. the hope that ecological or geo-political tragedy of near-apocalyptic scale can be averted, that a less devastating “correction”, as posited within rock ideology, might occur instead – “correction” being a significant word in Franzen’s oeuvre.

Throughout the novel, the music industry is presented as an elaborate system of credit and debt, which, of course, takes on added poignancy in the context of the global recession that began in 2008 as a “credit crunch”. Such is the extent to which the life of a recording artist is characterized by the tipping scales of credit and debt, that Richard tends to view his personal relations in these terms too. When he splits up with his casual girlfriend and bandmate Molly Tremain, Richard comes to realise that the disproportionate critical acclaim that the Traumatic had been receiving relative to their meager commercial success had been a result largely of the fact that Molly’s mother was a longtime Arts editor at the *New York Times*: “What had happened, as Richard theorized over an early supper with Walter and Patty when the band dragged itself through the Twin Cities yet again, was that he’d been buying press attention on credit all along, without realizing it, and that the press had finally concluded that familiarity with the Traumatic was never going to be necessary to anyone’s cultural literacy or street credibility, and so there was no reason to extend him further credit” (143). Later in the novel, Richard makes a series of exorbitant promises to Walter regarding his new band’s involvement with Walter’s “Free Space” campaign to make abstaining from having children fashionable with young people in order to ameliorate humanity’s predilection for ecological devastation. But Richard knows full well that none of these promises, such as emceeding a Free Space festival and “pestering big names to come and join him”, will come to pass as he is planning indirectly to divulge to Walter details of the affair that he has been having with Walter’s wife, Patty. In doing this, Richard hopes that he will be able to force Walter into the arms of his amorous personal assistant and, in the process,

clear his own way to Patty. Again the language of credit and debit permeates Richard's overly-caffeinated-and-nicotinized thoughts:

In his mind, he was doing nothing more than writing checks on an account with nothing in it, because, despite the actual chemical substances he'd ingested, the true substance of his state was a throbbing, single-minded focus on taking Patty away from Walter: this was the rhythm track, everything else was irrelevant high-end. Smash the Family: another song title. And once the family was smashed, he would not have to make good on any of his promises. (366)

By means of these metaphors of credit and debt, Richard's intermittently-precarious and frequently-reckless financial situation comes to serve as an oblique allegory of the neo-liberal era, especially the emergence and proliferation of financial products of a largely illusory nature, leading to a so-called "casino capitalism". The moral ramifications of such a system of credit and debt are played out most fully, not in relation to the essentially hedonistic character of Richard Katz, but instead in relation to Patty Berglund: Patty's painstaking personal audit forms two lengthy autobiographical sections in the novel, in which she reflects on her marriage with Walter in terms of a complex series of pluses and minuses. The motto that she glimpses on the wall of her daughter's college building, "USE WELL THY FREEDOM", encapsulates the novel's main theme and serves as a satiric indictment of neo-liberalism's de-regulated free-market economics – a "freedom", it is suggested, that has been used badly (184).

During the Traumatatics' wilderness years, Richard develops a sideline in building decks for luxury rooftop apartments in the Tribeca neighborhood of New York City. This detail is a reminder of the economic reality of the majority of those in the music industry: that there is not enough work of enough pay in the industry itself for them not to have to rely on other sources of income. After Richard's long-time collaborator succumbs to an horrendous accident of the kind that seems to frequent the pages of many a rock biography, the Traumatatics disband and Richard forms a new band, co-opting a young fan on pedal-steel to complete Walnut Surprise's alt-country line-up. Richard's economic fortunes take a sharp turn for the better with the release of their album *Nameless Lake*, a collection of songs secretly addressed to Patty, some of which Richard wrote while doing construction work on Walter and Patty's remote second home, next to the lake of the title.

Its "gorgeous...songs" aside, *Nameless Lake* is a commercial and critical success because it is perceived as the authentic expression of a mature artist, but the media interest and industry plaudits it garners make Richard feel radically *inauthentic*, causing him to lurch towards some decidedly immature behavior such as agreeing "to score a Danish art film" but then "taking 5,000 euros of Danish government arts funding up his nose" (191). Within a few years of his group being nominated for a Grammy, Richard is back building decks for NYC's high-rise gentry, but this time with little-or-no interest in being involved in the music industry. Very reluctantly, he submits to being interviewed by the skinny-jean-wearing son of one of his clients. Richard privately laments the way the boy's father, himself a former Traumatatics fan, nurtures his son's ambitions to be a guitarist in a rock band:

The kid had been given his own practice room, a cubical space lined with eggshell foam and scattered with more guitars than Katz had owned in thirty years. Already, for pure technique, to judge from what Katz had overheard in his comings and goings, the kid was a more hotdog soloist than Katz had ever been or ever would be. But so were a hundred thousand other American high-school boys. So what? Rather than thwarting his father's vicarious rock ambitions by pursuing entomology or interesting himself in financial derivatives, Zachary dutifully aped Jimi Hendrix. Somewhere there had been a failure of imagination. (199)

In this example, rock music has been fully domesticated and rock culture's essentially oedipal dynamic disrupted: there are no longer the same oppositions or distinctions within popular culture, especially between parent culture and teen/adolescent culture. (It should be mentioned, however, that the oedipal dynamic persists in the way that Walter's son Joey evinces a literally mercenary approach to personal enrichment, thereby rejecting his father's mostly anti-capitalist values. This, though, is a further rejection of the rock ideology with its espousal of anti- or hippie-capitalist ideals founded upon somewhat vague notions of collective identity.) As will be seen in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *Freedom* suggests that rock has limped on through the decades since its inception into an unwitting assimilation by the mainstream, as the social and cultural peccadilloes of the baby-boomers have gained almost universal tolerance and acceptance; the result is that the counter-cultural ideology underpinning rock music is now defunct (and "de-funked").

Rather than being a grudging acceptance of his public role as the frontman of a Grammy-nominated band, Richard's agreement to be interviewed is a way for him to flex his competitive muscles again by – so he intends – seducing the high-school girl whom his interviewer, the teenage Zachary, hopes to impress by posting the interview online. Richard uses the interview to mount a sarcastic diatribe against rock culture and the music industry in general. When asked by Zachary what he thinks of “the MP3 revolution”, Richard retorts sarcastically, “It’s great that a song now costs exactly the same as a pack of gum and lasts exactly the same amount of time before it loses its flavor and you have to spend another buck” (200). He spits the following glib and sneering obituary to the rock age and its counter-cultural ideology:

That era which finally ended whenever, yesterday – you know, that era when we pretended rock was the scourge of conformity and consumerism, instead of its anointed handmaid – that era was really irritating to me. I think it’s good for the honesty of rock and roll and good for the country in general that we can finally see Bob Dylan and Iggy Pop for what they really were: as manufacturers of wintergreen Chiclets.

Q: So you’re saying rock has lost its subversive edge?

A: I’m saying it never had any subversive edge. It was always wintergreen Chiclets. (200)

What Richard does, then, in this interview is to deride the widely-held assumption in rock culture that “there is some essential human activity, music-making, which has been colonized by commerce” (Frith 231). (I sometimes think of this as the “School-of-Rock” ethos, owing to the way Jack Black’s character in the film of that name defines rock music as being about “sticking it to the Man”.) Instead of being “something which happens *to* music”, the commercialization or industrialization of music “describes a process in which music itself is made” (Frith 231). This is to say the forms of musical communication that have obtained throughout the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first have not been a distortion of some more organic, integral, or pristine form of musicking; instead they are the direct result of prevailing social, technical, and economic circumstances: a specifically *industrialized* and *capitalist* mode of consumption and production, which, to be sure, allows for a good measure of “relative autonomy” but is not to be understood as a musical after-effect or post hoc imposition.

After finishing his day’s work at Zachary’s parents’ home, Richard makes his way to the train station “under a familiar cloud of post-interview remorse”: “He wasn’t worried about having given offense; his business was giving offense. He was worried about having sounded pathetic – too transparently the washed-up talent whose only recourse was to trash his betters. He strongly disliked the person he’d just demonstrated afresh that he unfortunately was” (Franzen 203-4). Once Zachary has posted their interview online and the “hit-counter” on his blog is “going crazy”, Richard finds he has to relinquish virtually all control over his public image in a way that is symptomatic of an identity crisis in the age of the internet (346). Zachary summarizes for Richard the traffic through his website: “there’s a minority now that’s saying you sound like an asshole and a

whiner. But that's just the player-hating fringe" (ibid.). Later, as Richard is travelling on the train, he has an altercation with a young couple regarding one of them littering. He acknowledges to himself that if either one of them had recognized him, "they would surely soon be blogging about what an asshole Richard Katz was" (350). The episode suggests an internet-facilitated degeneration of the culture of popular music into a culture of banal gossip – a welter of trivial comments and asides that render meaningful communication between an artist and his or her audience increasingly difficult. The blogosphere thus becomes a further arena among the popular media in which performing artists have dwindling control over their image or the meaning of themselves as a "star text", leading, in many cases, to nihilism and self-destruction (Dyer). There is too a Warholian sense that, via the internet, all of us have been subject to a similar process in which the definition of who we are finally eludes our grasp: a sense that our identities reside as so much data in the matrices of cyberspace.

In the latter half of the novel, a discussion takes place between several of the main characters regarding what Walter's newly-founded NGO can do musically to promote its cause of "reversing global population growth [by] making it uncool to have kids" (366). During the discussion, antagonism emerges between members of the older and younger generations in relation to their differing conceptions of how the music industry operates. Walter's personal assistant and romantic pursuer Lalitha envisions "a late-summer music and consciousness-raising festival on a twenty-acre goat farm" headlined by the era's most illustrious artists a la Woodstock (ibid.). This centralized notion of musical culture is immediately smacked down by Walter's daughter Jessica, partly in retaliation for what Jessica correctly perceives as Lalitha's romantic advances on her father: "Did Lalitha not

understand *anything* about young people's new relationship with music? It wasn't enough just to bring in some big-name talent! They had to send twenty interns out to twenty cities across the country and have them organize local festivals" (ibid.). Jessica, then, has a conception of contemporary musical culture as inherently networked, no longer functioning via the relationship between centre and periphery as in the rock era, but via a dispersed web of local nodes connected by the "new" rather than the "old" media. This exchange between Lalitha and Jessica reflects a resurgence of interest in live music in recent years, in particular the proliferation of music festivals, which correlates, in part, to the devaluation of recorded music in the era of downloads, file-sharing, and the limited licensing of pop songs for use in conjunction with the various forms of screen media. In an intensively mediatized culture, the prospect of attending a musical event that is both "live" and "local" feeds a residual appetite for rock "authenticity", providing young people with a significant rite of passage askance from, though not entirely outside of, the media circuits and loops they customarily inhabit. As will be seen, these themes are taken up, too, in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Richard Katz's last musical output in the novel is a CD sent by post to his estranged college-friend, entitled *Songs for Walter*. After Walter has opened the CD's plastic wrapping, he is overcome by a complex of tender and sorrowful memories and emotions when he notices that the first song on the album bears the title "Two Kids Good, No Kids Better", which Walter had jokingly suggested Richard use as a song title, back when they were roommates at college: "He heard a sharp cry of pain, his own, as if it were someone else's. The *fucker*, the *fucker*, it wasn't fair... 'God, what an asshole you are,' he said, smiling and weeping. 'This is so unfair, you asshole' " (557). Richard's sending the

album effects a rapprochement on many levels, fusing the two men's often opposing though sometimes complementary values. Throughout the novel, Walter and Richard have represented, respectively, domesticity and bohemianism, though neither figure is conventional as such – nor conventionally unconventional. By producing an album of songs addressed to his oldest friend, Richard is submitting in part to Walter's earnest worldview, acknowledging the positive influence that Walter has had on him, the way Walter has motivated Richard to be “a good person” in spite of the latter's deeply-rooted instincts to the contrary.

“It's Too Late. I'm Too Old”: Representations of the Music Industry in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

The power of music – or at least, in this instance, the sight of a musical artifact – to produce a rapprochement is a theme that also figures prominently in the final chapter of *A Visit to the Goon Squad*. For most of Egan's novel, however, the music industry is presented in terms that parallel Franzen's caustic image of it as the moral and aesthetic equivalent of producing and consuming chewing gum. Like Franzen's novel, too, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* mourns the passing of what, in broad terms, can be called “the rock era”, coinciding with the second half of the twentieth century, and in which popular music occupied a central place in the cultural imaginary to an extent that is difficult to conceive of now in our present era.

By putting popular music at the heart of *Freedom* and *Goon Squad*, Franzen and Egan allow the complexities of the music industry to stand for the complexities of social mediation more generally. The following quote from Gerry Smyth's book on “the music-

novel” applies to both authors’ representation of the music industry: “pop accumulates so many layers of significance during each stage of its realization – from composition to performance to consumption – that it stands as an extremely complex phenomenon within any society’s wider cultural landscape” (167, 109). In particular, Egan and Franzen both explore the notion that the record industry is fraught with a much greater degree of instability and unpredictability than industries in which identical or nearly identical products can be sold over and over again, and that it is this very indeterminacy that makes the music industry indicative, or emblematic even, of our era and its forms of sociality. Furthermore, the music industry has an inherent pathos, as, seen from one perspective, it is founded more upon managing failure than producing success: “Despite constant attempts to establish a sense of brand loyalty to an artist, or to develop or imitate hit formulas, despite all of the marketing and promotional techniques and coping strategies..., the recording industry constantly produces more failures than successes” (Negus 152). This tendency towards failure and the thwarting of intentions again makes the music industry a particularly apposite vehicle for the exploration of contiguous areas of contemporary experience within the novel.

In a book the subtitle of which is “culture and conflict in the popular music industry”, Keith Negus typifies the music industry as a complex or chaotic system: “During my research a number of staff in the recording industry referred to a phenomenological experience of chaos and disorder when trying to explain the routine and irregular activities and myriad personal relationships which surrounded them and informed their daily work” (151). This aspect of life in the music industry is explored in detail in Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which, to a much greater extent than Franzen’s *Freedom*,

describes a world of record company executives, A & R personnel, and publicists, all of whom work behind the scenes in order to make their roster of artists commercially successful.

The structure of Egan's novel is well-suited to elucidating the complexity and indeterminacy inherent in a career in the music industry. Each chapter is more or less self-contained and the novel, though following a broadly chronological trajectory, presents events radically out of sequence. An especially bold structuring device is the way that peripheral characters in one chapter reappear as the main characters of subsequent chapters or vice versa, often with an accompanying shift in narrative voice from third-person to first-person and with a dramatic leap of time-frame. This experimental structure produces a complex prismatic conception of identity, which contrasts the more straightforwardly biographical movement of Franzen's characters towards greater awareness and knowledge of self. In Egan's novel, characters' identities are continually being refracted through other characters' perceptions of them as well as via the narration of unanticipated incidents from otherwise-disjointed moments in their lives. The effect is to allow the reader to perceive a complex web of relations, both between characters and between the different eras of a single character's life, a web which the characters themselves are, at best, only dimly aware of.

Thus, in chapter one, we are introduced to Sasha, a Xanax-popping kleptomaniac woman now in her mid-thirties who is out on a date with a male legal secretary called Alex. After a one-night stand in her apartment on New York's Lower East Side, the pair never meet again. However, Alex reappears several times throughout the novel, and, in the final chapter set sometime in the 2020s, he ends up working for Sasha's former boss,

Bennie Salazar, the founder of Sow's Ear Records and discoverer of a successful post-punk outfit called the Conduits. From the third-person narration of the first chapter, which is refracted through Sasha's troubled and distracted state of mind, we also learn that Bennie "sprinkled gold flakes into his coffee – as an aphrodisiac, she suspected – and sprayed pesticide in his armpits" (Egan 5). Other than these details, that is all we hear about Bennie. In chapter two, however, we meet Bennie at a time in his life when Sasha is still working for him as his personal assistant and he has just embarked on his regimen of coffee sprinkled with gold flakes, which, as Sasha has correctly surmised, Bennie hopes will reinvigorate his flagging libido:

The world was unquestionably a more peaceful place without the half hard-on that had been his constant companion since the age of thirteen, but did Bennie want to live in such a world? He sipped his gold-inflected coffee and glanced at Sasha's breasts, which had become the litmus test he used to gauge his improvement. (23)

Occurring to someone who has spent his whole adult life in the music industry, initially as a musician and then as an executive, the loss of Bennie's "mojo" is symptomatic, in some respects, of what he views as the record industry's terminal decline. In an argument over whether or not to keep one of the label's acts that Bennie had thought sounded promising when he signed them five years earlier, Sasha reminds him of his own motto for working in the music business: " 'Five years is five *hundred* years' " (35). Here, the

built-in obsolescence of musical products serves as an analogue of Bennie's fears regarding his own obsolescence – commercial, parental, but chiefly sexual.

On his way to pick up his son from school, Bennie listens to the Sleepers and the Dead Kennedys on his car stereo, “San Francisco bands he'd grown up with”, and ponders his own role in the industry:

He listened for muddiness, the sense of actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual room. Nowadays that quality (if it existed at all) was usually an effect of analogue signaling rather than bona fide tape – everything was an effect in the bloodless constructions Bennie and his peers were churning out. He worked tirelessly, feverishly, to get things right, stay on top, make songs that people would love and buy and download as ring tones (and steal, of course) – above all, to satisfy the multinational crude-oil extractors he'd sold his label to five years ago. But Bennie knew that what he was bringing into the world was shit. Too clear, too clean. The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was *digitization*, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. *An aesthetic holocaust!* Bennie knew better than to say this stuff aloud. (23-4)

Like so many others of his generation, Bennie fetishizes the alleged authenticity of pre-digital recordings, his nostalgia for the album as a commodity fetish dovetailing with his nostalgia for his youth, “the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness” that listening to

these old songs induces (ibid.). In a future-oriented industry in which staff are continually trying to find “ ‘the next big thing’, to produc[e] tomorrow’s sounds, to bring...into existence what is ‘not yet’ ”, Bennie has succumbed to nostalgia (Negus 152). Recalling how his mentor, the producer Lou Kline, had told him in the nineties that rock and roll had peaked at Monterey Pop, Bennie acknowledges now, as he did then, that “Nostalgia was the end – everyone knew that” (Egan 39).

Now middle aged, Bennie must endure a mostly fruitless search for the holy grail of rock authenticity: a musical transcendental signified, a presence not subject to the vagaries of fashion’s floating signifiers. For a few fleeting moments, he thinks he has found it when he and Sasha pay a visit to two sisters whose band, Stop/Go, has failed to deliver a single album in the five years that they’ve been on Bennie’s label. Listening to the sisters play in their basement, Bennie feels “the raw, almost-threadbare sound of their voices mixed with the clash of instruments”: “these sensations mixed with a faculty deeper in Bennie than judgment or even pleasure; they communed directly with his body, whose shivering, bursting reply made him dizzy” (31). But interrupted by various “memory spasm[s]”, i.e. involuntary memories of personal humiliation, Bennie is lifted out of this moment of musical jouissance, until, on the way back in the car, he is forced to concur with Sasha’s verdict that the Stop/Go sisters are “Unlistenable” (25, 35).

Rather than talk, they listen to a selection of early punk songs playing on the stereo, Bennie toying with the idea that through the playlist “he was confessing to her his disillusionment – his *hatred* for the industry he’d given his life to” (38). From “some early Who”, “the Stooges”, “Patti Smith’s ragged poetry” and “the jock hardcore of Black Flag”, through the “great compromise” of “alternative”, Bennie finally arrives at

“the singles he’d just today been petitioning radio stations to add, husks of music, lifeless and cold as the squares of office neon cutting the blue twilight” (ibid.). Breaking the silence between them, Sasha remarks that “ ‘It’s incredible...how there’s just nothing there’ ” (ibid.). Bennie at first takes this as a sign that Sasha has somehow been able to follow his “musical rant to its grim conclusion”, but a moment later he realizes she is “looking downtown...to the empty space where the Twin Towers had been” (ibid.). This exchange between Bennie and Sasha draws a parallel, which emerges elsewhere in the novel, between the decline of US political hegemony and the decline of the rock ideology in a post-9/11 world. The “rock era” has ended or is coming to an end in the same era in which the US no longer seems capable of exerting the same level of political and cultural dominance it once did, its fate now being intertwined with those of ascendant economies, most notably China, whose population greatly outnumbers America’s own.

In the following chapter, we encounter Bennie as a Mohawked teenager through the admiring first-person narration of Rhea, one of his bandmates in a punk group called the Flaming Dildos. On weekends, the bandmates journey to the Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco in order to hear all the punk bands play. The elusiveness of rock authenticity emerges again as a theme, this time through Rhea’s anxious and uncertain narration.

When she and the other female member of the Flaming Dildos go to “the Mab’s graffiti-splattered bathroom”, they overhear various gossip about the other punks: “Knowing all this makes us one step closer to being real, but not completely. When does a fake Mohawk become a real Mohawk? Who decides? How do you know if it’s happened?” (48).

In a later chapter, Bennie's former bandmate in the Flaming Dildos, the singer and guitarist Scotty, pays a surprise visit to Bennie at the latter's offices at Sow's Ear Records. In spite of the intervening years, Bennie is described by Scotty as being "trim", "fit", and wearing an "expensive"-looking shirt (103). By contrast, Scotty's bohemian rock and roll lifestyle has degenerated into something more closely resembling the life of a vagabond. In the swanky waiting room, Scotty senses a couple "of the corporate persuasion...edge away" from him, then, inside Bennie's grand office with its view of the whole city, Scotty is separated from his former friend and bandmate by an enormous black desk. Their strained conversation turns to the question of "what happened between A and B", i.e. between then and now, and how their two lives took such different turns, this being the novel's abiding theme. Engulfed by a mood of stifled resentment, Scotty experiences a violent fantasy in which he decapitates Bennie with his bare hands before dropping it onto the desk of Bennie's personal assistant, Sasha (103, 107). As we already know by this stage in the novel, no-one, not even someone as outwardly successful as Bennie, is immune to the cruelly erosive effects of time. In the figures of Scotty and Bennie, the pathos of aging extends to rock culture, which has itself "grown old".

It should be pointed out at this stage that one of the central themes of Egan's work as a whole is the shame associated with aging in a youth- and beauty-obsessed culture. This is especially pertinent in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* with its cruel dissection of what becomes of musicians once the years of fast living and self-indulgence have receded, exposing a pudgy, wrinkled senescence, itself a metaphor for the decline of US political and cultural hegemony in a post-9/11 world, more specifically the decline of the rock ideology and the liberal capitalist consensus it was founded on. This theme finds its

starkest treatment in the figure of Bosco, the former lead guitarist of a group called the Conduits, which Bennie had helped make famous. It is typical of the novel's chronological game-playing that we first come across Bosco once he is physically decrepit, a present-tense description of his manic skinny younger self being saved for a later chapter. Instead of being "a hive of redheaded mania who had made Iggy Pop look indolent onstage", Bosco is now "obese, alcoholic and cancer-ridden" (119, 132). When Bennie's wife Stephanie goes to visit him, accompanied by her brother Jules, ostensibly to help Bosco with the promotion of his new album but more out of a sense of loyalty to him as she and her husband's oldest friend, she notices how "His red hair had devolved into a stringy gray ponytail" and how "An unsuccessful hip replacement had left him with the lurching, belly-hoisting walk of a refrigerator on a hand truck" (132). In an echo of Bennie's encounter with this former friend and bandmate Scotty, Bosco remarks that his new album's "called *A to B*, right?...And that's the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?" (134). In order to reinforce his point, he adds "Time's a goon, right?" (ibid.). This phrase "Time is a goon" explains the otherwise enigmatic title of the novel: time is a thug or bully, so that receiving "a visit from the goon squad" means to be subjected to the violence and cruelty of time and its passing. In Bosco's case the thuggery of time is all the more harsh as he has lived most of his adult life as an icon of youthful energy, his residual public image, being cruelly at odds with what he has actually become. The plan he pitches to his publicist Stephanie is for a grotesque parody of the now-familiar rock and roll "comeback": one last tour in which he will imitate his former frenetic self in the almost-certain knowledge that the physical exertion will kill him at some point: "We know the

outcome, but we don't know when, or where, or who will be there when it finally happens. It's a Suicide Tour" (136).

The phrase "Time's a goon" reoccurs in the final chapter of the novel when the now-aged Bennie uses it in order to goad the equally-aged Scotty onto the stage at an open-air concert he has arranged for him at the former site of the Twin Towers: "You gonna let that goon push you around?" (341). In reply, Scotty shakes his head and mutters resignedly "The goon won" (ibid.).

Before discussing Scotty's unexpectedly momentous concert in more detail, I would like to analyze what has, with good reason, become probably the novel's most talked-about chapter: I refer to chapter 12, which consists entirely of PowerPoint slides. This chapter takes us into the near-future and is "narrated" by Sasha's teenage daughter, Alison. Alison's obsession with detailing the day-to-day events in the lives of her mother, father and brother in the form of graphs, flow charts, and pie diagrams seems to border on the autistic, but is as nothing compared to her brother's obsession, which, we can infer, is a symptom of actual and quite profound autism. Alison's brother Lincoln records in meticulous detail what he describes as "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" (242), i.e. moments during rock songs in which there is a brief pause. One of the most poignant slides bears the heading "Lincoln Wants to Say/Ends Up Saying:", and traces how the words " 'I love you, Dad' " are subjected to a series of logical but overly-factual contortions as part of Lincoln's train of thought until they are vocalized as the exclamation " 'Hey Dad, there's a partial silence at the end of [the Steve Miller Band's] 'Fly Like an Eagle,' with a sort of rushing sound in the background that I think is supposed to be the wind, or maybe time rushing past!' " (255). The most lasting impression of Lincoln's exhaustive cataloguing

of such pauses and their various parameters is bemusement, yet this apparently autistic behavior can also be related to the novel's other themes. In an incident involving the whole family, Lincoln's father Drew tries to tease out from his son why the pauses matter so much to him. When his son responds with a litany of illustrations of yet more compositions with pauses mid-song, Drew loses his patience with him and Lincoln starts to cry. Sasha intervenes, explaining very softly to her husband what these "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" mean to their son: "The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn't really over, so you're relieved. But then the song does actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL." (289). This explanation is linked to the novel's theme of history, culture, and society being close to the end but not quite, or seemingly coming to an end and then continuing, for a while at least. In an earlier chapter of the novel, one of the many characters to have suffered a humiliating fall from grace, Stephanie's brother Jules, offers the following response to their meeting with Bosco, combining mournfulness with cautious optimism in a way that becomes characteristic of the latter sections of the novel: " 'If you'd asked me this morning, I would have said we were finished...All of us, the whole country – the fucking world. But now I feel the opposite...Sure, everything is ending...but not yet' " (139).

This sense of, if not quite a new beginning then, a deferred ending becomes very evident in the final chapter, which is set in the 2020s. In one of Egan's deliciously satiric and dystopian touches, the recording industry has been saved by the emergence of a "preverbal" market consisting of millions of babies who each press a button on a miniature handset in order to buy songs they like the sound of: "Fifteen years of war had

ended with a baby boom, and these babies had not only revived a dead industry but also become the arbiters of musical success” (320). Egan’s satire here operates on at least a few different levels. Firstly, she is satirizing the original baby-boomer generation, who came of age in the mid-to-late 1960s and were able to exert enormous cultural influence partly by dint of the sheer size of their demographic. Secondly, she is satirizing our culture’s obsession with youth, in which the tastes and fashions of the young are routinely kowtowed to. In connection with this latter point, she is satirizing the tendency of the marketing industry post-1945 to target ever younger sectors of society, from the teenager of the 1950s, to the sexualized “tweenie” or pre-teen of the 1990s, until, logically, their focus turns to a sector who are not yet out of diapers.

Having suffered his own fall from grace – divorce from Stephanie and dismissal from the record label he founded – Bennie has sought out his erstwhile friend and bandmate Scotty Hausmann, and set about producing albums for him (319). When we encounter Bennie in the final chapter, he is formulating a strategy for promoting a free concert for Scotty that will build upon the success Scotty has been having with “the pointers”, i.e. infants who download music using handsets. In order to do this, he enlists the help of Alex, the one-time legal secretary that Bennie’s former PA Sasha had slept with in chapter one, and who has gone on to have a succession of mostly unsatisfying jobs in the record business (320). Alex wants to work for Bennie as a sound engineer but, instead, Bennie persuades him to head his marketing operation, remarking caustically that the music industry is “not about sound anymore. It’s not about *music*. It’s about reach” (319). In spite of these comments, Bennie praises the “pure”, “untouched” nature of Scotty’s music, and has recorded his slide guitar with “a raspy, analog sound” (ibid.).

The promotional campaign for Scotty's concert takes the form of what we would recognize as an example of "viral" marketing: Alex's task is to enlist a team of "parrots" who, unbeknownst to each other, will tell friends, family and acquaintances about a "great" singer and slide-guitarist who happens to be playing a free concert at an open-air performance space, "the Footprint", on the former site of the Twin Towers. In spite of the seeming-applicability of the "viral" metaphor, Bennie's new personal assistant Lulu, who is studying marketing at grad school, insists that such metaphors, drawn from the field of epidemiology, are no longer deemed appropriate; "reach", she explains, "isn't describable in terms of cause and effect anymore: it's simultaneous. It's faster than the speed of light, that's actually been measured" (324-5). Thus, she and her fellow marketing students are required to study particle physics as part of their program. On the day of the concert, there does indeed seem to be sense of non-linearity and synchronicity in the way the promotional campaign has come together. Alex, his wife, and their young daughter merge with the surge of people on the closed-off streets of Manhattan, who, like them, are on their way to hear Scotty play, each person they recognize informing them that they've "heard" that Scotty's supposed to be really good live (338).

When Alex arrives at the venue for the concert, all is not well however. Bennie summons him to Scotty Hausmann's trailer where, in Scotty's place, he finds someone more closely resembling a "decrepit roadie", and who is suffering acute stage-fright: "Scotty Hausmann sounded like he'd recently wept or was on the verge of weeping – possibly both. He had shoulder-length hair slicked away from his face and empty, blasted eyes, all of it amounting to a derelict impression...: a shell whose essence had vanished" (340-1). In spite of Bennie's exhortations to go through with the concert, Scotty refuses:

“ ‘It’s too late. I’m too old. I just – I can’t’ ” (340). It would seem that time has finally “beat” the rock generation. However, an intervention by Lulu saves the day. Arriving just as Scotty is trying to escape, she offers to walk with him to the stage. As Scotty takes her arm, his other hand now holding his guitar, Alex notices “a ghost version of Scotty Hausmann flicker...from the dregs that were left, sexy and rakish” (343). Once onstage, Scotty’s music combines a strength, honesty, and purity of purpose that unites the crowd, giving them a meaningful collective experience of the kind, it is suggested, they had been hungering for: “it may be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock” (343-4). Here, the musical agency is as much the audience’s as it is Scotty’s. “Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance [post 9/11] had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar” (344). As Alex scans the crowd looking for his wife and daughter, he sees “the rapt, sometimes tearstained faces of adults, the elated scant-toothed grins of toddlers, and young people...gazing at Scotty Hausmann with the rhapsodic joy of a generation finally desiring someone worthy of its veneration” (345).

Conclusion

Thus, Scotty’s momentous concert at the end of *Goon Squad* offers the sense of a new beginning but one which, at the same time, takes us a step closer to an inevitable finality. As with the end of Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, music helps effect a rapprochement in a fractured society and offers a summation of lived experience. But it does this with both optimism and mournfulness – the certain knowledge that the rock era, spanning the

second half of the twentieth century, has now passed, and along with it the ideology that underpinned it. Rock and roll has grown old, as have the illusions that had sustained it, but it is not so old that it can't manage a final threadbare encore, a swansong of sorts to usher in an uncertain future.

Notes

¹ In a survey of English language newspapers from around the world from the last three years (using the Nexis UK database), the phrase “the new rock and roll” was found in headlines in reference to (among other things): “theater”, “talking”, “religion”, “science”, “keeping hens”, “ballroom”, “food”, “comedy”, “clean living”, “private banking”, and “hedge funds”.

² For a fairly comprehensive list of rock novels, see Schaub.

³ For an example of this kind of sensationalist rock novel, though by an author with considerable insider knowledge of the music industry, see Tony Parson’s *Platinum Logic* (1981).

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