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Deena WEINSTEIN, *Rock'n America: A Social and Cultural History*

Russel Reising



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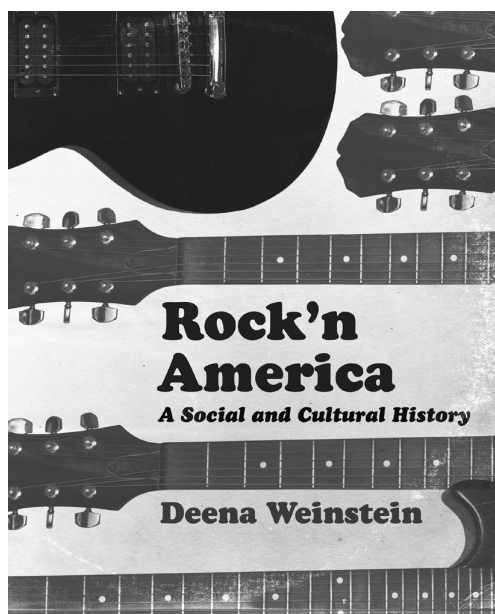
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Rock'n America: A Social and Cultural History

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While there are quite a few excellent histories of rock 'n' roll (Palmer's *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History*), and even of American rock music (see Altschuler's *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America*), Deena Weinstein essays to capture the specifically American story in *Rock'n America: A Social and Cultural History*. While most of the information Weinstein provides will probably be common knowledge for most readers over the age of about 40 or anybody with more than a passing interest in the history of rock and roll, her run through the important aesthetic, social, political, and economic trends within which rock emerged and matured might be of interest to younger students or casual fans of the genre.

Weinstein sets up a reasonable model for assessing the history of rock when she maps out the historically persistent interrelationships among artists, fans, and mediators (record companies, radio stations and DJs, etc.). However, while she pays attention to the synergy among

these forces for about half of the book, this tripartite model is pretty much dropped for most of the second half, with the exception of her discussion of touring and fixed festivals. In fact, it's in her attention to the music industry that Weinstein's book offers occasional insights, whereas her commentary on the demographics of rock fans rarely rises above casual and unsubstantiated asides. *Rock'n America* reads more like patched together lecture notes than it does a coherent social or cultural analysis.

Puzzlingly incomplete and, at times, simply bizarre in its coverage, *Rock'n America*, spends important time establishing figures like Louis Jordan, "Big Mama" Thornton, and Amos Milburn as "rock's precursors" and includes artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard in its discussion of rock's early days. However, imagine a book recounting the social and history of rock in America without a single mention of James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Lenny Kravitz, Tina Turner, Marvin Gaye, B. B. King, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, Smokey Robinson, Sly and the Family Stone, the Supremes, the Chambers Brothers, or Funkadelic! Prince is mentioned once, with reference to how his "look" and hair comported with MTV's style sense. However narrowly one might define "rock," "soul," "R&B," or any other genre, these exclusions detract from the book's value. Evidently the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and virtually every list of rock's greatest songs, performers, and albums got it completely wrong! All this in a book that defines rock as "a mongrel, a hybrid offspring" of earlier musical forms and its roots in various forms of African-American musical styles and innovations. But the exclusions are not all of a racial nature. Weinstein devotes almost fifteen pages to Nirvana (either focused discussion or commentary with frequent reference to

the group and Kurt Cobain) and yet only mentions (in passing) groups like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Ramones, and Simon and Garfunkel a few times, completely ignores Neil Young, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the Velvet Underground. Weinstein does mention Phish once, but only to comment on the cleverness of their logo! No mention whatsoever of those so-called garage bands whose music filled so much radio air in the 1960s and have come to be regarded as a seminal element in rock's lineage. Anybody familiar with the wonderful songs included in the influential Nuggets collection, regarded as seminal by virtually every rock critic, historian, and musician who has ever commented on it, will wonder what tradition(s) of rock Weinstein is familiar with! Granted, *Rock'n America* doesn't pretend to address each and every important act or trend, but its elisions nevertheless point to fundamental flaws in its program.

Sometimes, Weinstein simply gets it wrong, or her opinions test one's patience. For example, on Creedence Clearwater Revival's great song "Fortunate Son," she remarks "the words that repeat the song's title and those in the first verse about red white and blue flag waving, are easy to discern and would lead you to think that "Fortunate Son" was a patriotic song" (154). Perhaps it's my problem, but I simply can't imagine that being true. Perhaps, like John Fogerty, "I ain't no fortunate one"! Moreover, when Weinstein compares Ronald Reagan and Bruce Springsteen based on her assertion that "they appeared to be at one with what they were saying and doing. In the language of rock, they were 'authentic'" (211), or when she suggests that Springsteen probably wouldn't have become a superstar without MTV music videos (217), can anybody

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take her seriously? And, finally, Weinstein puzzlingly identifies Paul Revere and the Raiders as the group who made "Louie, Louie" famous. True, Paul Revere and the Raiders did record the song shortly after the Kingsmen recorded their version that remains, but their version had moderate success only in the far west and Hawaii! It's the Kingsmen's version that inspired Dave Marsh's famous "three chords and a cloud of dust" remark, and it's their version that remains, to this day, a hallmark of rock sensibility. Weinstein also repeats the common mistake that two Hell's Angels knifed a man to death at Altamont during the Stones' performance of "Sympathy for the Devil," when it was actually during "Under My Thumb." Moreover, does anybody really need to be told that the Beatles' hair cuts were significant, or that their "bowl cut" style "resembled the result of cutting hair along the rim of an overturned bowl on one's head" (103)? Is it necessary to remark that "a record crossed over because it appealed to more than one market, more than one audience" (47).

Written in a monotonous, and unimaginative style, with journalistic paragraphs that rarely exceed a few sentences (one page on Chuck Berry has eight tiny paragraphs!), *Rock'n America* communicates almost nothing of rock's excitement, impact, influence in any way, perhaps especially in the "social and cultural" historical fashion indicated in the subtitle. Even when she ventures beyond simple observations, Weinstein falls flat. In what way can Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison be regarded as "a countercultural version of Dorothy's pals in the *Wizard of Oz*, each one marching to their own drummer down a yellow brick road in Oz"? Furthermore, this book *really* needed an editor! Weinstein elaborates Sam Phillips recording

"Rocket 88" at Chess studios in Chicago and notes that some regard it as the "first rock song" at least three times, each time as though it's the first. Similarly, consider these three passages:

"The economic prosperity of the 1950s that allowed teenagers to stay in school, rather than go to work to help support their family, also allowed them to have discretionary income. Wages from part-time jobs or the allowances given to them by their parents could be used to fulfill desires rather than needs." (38)

"In various cities, DJs were discovering that their audience, especially at night, was composed mainly of teenagers. They programmed music to suit those listeners and attracted advertisers interested in this new teenage market with disposable income, thanks to allowances and part-time jobs." (50)

"Much of the cause of the generational divide was the post-World War II economic boom. Prosperity allowed families to live in larger homes where teenagers had their own rooms. It provided them with money that they could spend on entertainment rather than necessities. It also kept teenagers in school rather than entering the workforce." (70)

Can I get an editor!?

Rock'n America does conclude strongly, with an interesting discussion of the ways in which digital formats, downloading, and recent trends in demographics and Western economies have impacted rock for the artists, fans, and mediators that she purports to focus on. Overall, however, this is a pedestrian survey of some important issues and a fairly tedious rehearsal of many of rock's great stories.

Russell REISING