



How Does It Feel?: Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Philosophy of Rock and Roll

By Grant Maxwell

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Grant Maxwell examines the recorded music of popular culture with the same subtlety and care as he brings to the literary and philosophical texts of high culture. He seeks not just breadth of knowledge but coherence of insight; not just accumulation of knowledge but depth of understanding.

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How Does It Feel? traces the significance of rock and roll through the early careers of Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and Bob Dylan, drawing on some of the most profound philosophical ideas of the last few centuries. Through the artists' own words and intimate accounts, this study suggests that archaic modes of thought, including those associated with mysticism, alchemy, shamanism, and ecstatic spiritual practice, and even with often trivialized phenomena described by words like "magic," "destiny," and "prophecy," are vitally important for understanding how these musicians were able to catalyze the inception of an epochal revolution in human consciousness.

From the recording of Presley's first hit at Sun studio to the Beatles' primal Hamburg initiation to Dylan's "transfiguration," this study shows how rock and roll has enacted the return of relational modes repressed since Descartes' equation of thought with human being in the seventeenth century. Although the privileging of rationality, materialism, and science has apparently been in service to the development of humanity's intellectual capacities, this "ascent of man" has come at the expense of intuitive, affective, and embodied ways of knowing.

However, nothing can be repressed forever, and rock and roll appears to have been a compensatory reaction to the modern rationalization and disenchantment

of culture. Through an engaging retelling of the familiar narratives from a novel philosophical perspective, *How Does It Feel?* illuminates how the renewed attention to bodily experience performed by these musicians has opened the door to even more deeply repressed premodern modes, mediating what appears to be the emergence of a new world view that integrates modern and premodern premises.

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Editorial Review

Review

The first three chapters, about each title character and their particular artistic genesis, are good cultural history and excellent pop music analysis (his explication of Dylan's rejection of modernity is one of the better summations available of this complicated figure). . . . The accounts provide fresh, rewarding perspectives on historical moments that have been theorized to death, if not outright mythologized. . . . Grasping at any threads that might bind high culture with low . . . this very polar tension generates the ultimately subtle magnetism of Maxwell's book.

H-Net Reviews

About the Author

Grant Maxwell is the author of *How Does It Feel?: Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Philosophy of Rock and Roll*. He has served as a professor of English at Baruch College in New York, he holds a PhD from the City University of New York's Graduate Center, he has written for *American Songwriter* magazine and the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, and he works at Vanderbilt University Press. He's also a musician, and he lives in Nashville, Tennessee with his wife and son.

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