

# **Rocking Critical Management: Utopia, Dystopia and Work in Rock Music**

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## Abstract

This paper explores how the relationship between work and utopia has been expressed rock music. It is argued that the cultural discourse in rock provides important critical insights into the meanings of work in contemporary western culture; meanings which emerge through a juxtaposition of, and tension between, representations of utopian desire with the lived experience of work. The paper examines how rock has enunciated a sustained engagement with the cultural idealization of work as utopia and explores the value of this for the critical study of organizations. On this basis three images of work are delineated – work as a dystopia to be escaped, the troubled relationship between work and love utopias, and the idea of work as a false yet culturally potent utopia.

**Key Words:** rock music, utopia, popular culture, critique of work, critique in culture

And on their promises of paradise

You will not hear a laugh

*Bob Dylan*

This paper emerges from my long standing interest in researching the relationship between popular culture and management, work and organizations. In this particular instance I examine how work is represented in rock music. At a time where it has been deemed relevant to put ‘people first’ in organizations, such an examination reveals an initial irony. In my broad review of rock music from its inception in the 1950s to the present, it would seem that, as far as rock musicians are concerned, people do not come first when it comes to work. Indeed, it is seemingly impossible to find any examples of song writers or musicians who represent work with such positive sloganeering. The possibility of ‘people first’ as an outcome of managerial practice exists, in this discourse, not as a reality but only as a wish. People first emerges as a utopian concept.

In this paper, I seek to bring popular culture to bear on the critical study of management by examining, through rock, a critically ambivalent notion of utopia which brings into question the relationship

between the dreams of a better world and the often harsh reality of everyday experience at work (Rhodes 2004). The paper will demonstrate how the cultural discourse of utopia as expressed in rock provides critical insights into contemporary western work culture that question and problematise utopian managerial discourses that valorize organizations, market capitalism and heroic leaders and entrepreneurs.

### **Approaching Popular Culture**

It is clear that there are many of examples of popular culture that focus critical attention on contemporary work and organizations (see Rhodes, 2001, 2002, 2004). In terms of critical management, I suggest that the value of relating to such examples is not to perform a 'critique of culture', but to connect with the 'critique in culture'. In popular music in particular the explicit lyrical themes and the activities of the musicians themselves are frequently critical of the capitalist means through which music is produced and distributed. For some rock musicians, this means adopting an overtly political stance. From Billy Bragg in the UK, to Steve Earle in the US, to Peter Garrett in Australia, politics and music can be easily connected.

Notwithstanding its explicit political possibilities, it is also relevant that popular music can be regarded as a place where a more cultural and personal politics is played out (Rowe, 1995) – it is on such examples that I will focus in this paper. In attesting to the critical possibilities of rock music, however, it is important to note that there is no reason to believe that the meaning of songs as interpreted by an analyst is the same as it is for other listeners, or that lyrical content necessarily forms or reflects listeners beliefs (Frith, 1996). In this respect it is important to note that I am approaching cultural products not in terms of their social functions or effects, but rather I take these products as a form of knowledge that draw on and inform shared narratives available more generally in culture (see Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2004). This does not mean that rock offers homological representations of the social, but it does mean that rock has aesthetic value by virtue of the cultural discourse that it relates to and the interpretive possibilities that it opens up (see Frith 1996). Rock provides creative possibilities that enable people to understand their own social circumstances and provides insight into the human spirit (Cooper 1997) in a way that has a long history of challenging convention (Kohl

1993). Thus, in terms of understanding management and work critically, the representations of work contained in rock can be regarded as a form of knowledge that is informed by popular social critique that seeks to both question and make sense of the experience of work. A particular value of this critique is that it is positioned by a “voice from within” culture rather than a “voice from above” culture – the latter being a position from which much management theory is written (Rhodes, 2004: 1).

### **Organizations and Market Utopias**

Cooper (1997) has commented that the origins of rock in the 1950s tantalised a new youth as “energy, brilliance, pandemonium, experimentation and danger, lurked in the lyrics, licks and leers” (p. 102). As I wish to explore here, much of this potential has been exercised to provide compelling discussions of people’s relationship with work. An initial canvas of rock thematics suggests promise. Although commonly viewed as a collection of ‘songs about cars and girls’ it is clear that work has been a sustained topic in rock and roll. As far back as 1958 Eddie Cochrane was complaining about how work impinged on his youthful freedom in ‘Summertime Blues’. As well as such personal contentions, rock musicians have commented poignantly on the problematics of organizational change – take for example Billy Joel’s ‘Allentown’ (1982), Sting’s (1985) ‘We Work the Black Seam’ or Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Youngstown’ (1995) each of which examine the hardship and irony of de-industrialization as their theme.

Perhaps one of the most sustained work thematics that emerges in rock music, however, is one that questions the work-based utopianism. As I will go on to explore, rock music seems to herald a need for escape from the false promises of utopia that are embedded in the cultural discourse of work. It is rare to find any rock songs that celebrate a dogmatic, idealised or utopian notion of work and organizations. When rockers sing about work, they sing about the problems people have with it. It seems that this is not because those who write rock songs are somehow inherently negative people – rock’s great theme, ‘love’, is treated in all its positive, negative and ambivalent connotations. Work, however, is rarely perceived positively – especially when that work is in the form of being employed by an organization and means having a boss. As an example, the emergence of punk rock in the mid 1970s, especially in the UK, directly addressed the theme of work as a false utopia. For bands like *The*

*Clash*, this was an explicitly political agenda much of which “addressed the growing dissatisfaction young people felt as they faced the harsh realities of the job market in 1976” (D’Ambrosio, 2003: 38). *The Clash* sang about the lack of ‘Career Opportunities’ (1976): “They offered me the office; they offered me the shop; They said I’d better take anything they’d got”. As lead singer Joe Strummer said in a 2002 interview: “Industrial society offered nothing really, and as we moved to this more fragmented society with more emphasis on technology the state was looking for us to work according to our class ... it all seemed about controlling class, particularly the lower classes” (Strummer cited in D’Ambrosio, 2003: 38).

The advent of rock and roll in the mid 1950s is roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of post-industrialism in the west. However, while advocates of post-industrialism have suggested a logic that new forms of work are “harbingers of potentially liberating social relations and institutions” (Frankel, 1987: 2) rock music has questioned the liberatory effects of such changes. Rock emerged in a socio-historic context where change became so prevalent and all encompassing that simplistic teleological notions of progress seemed untenable for the youth of the time. Where the adult world “promised them paradise, the angrier, more frustrated and more insecure they grew” (Grossberg, 1984/2004: 315) – utopia might always have been problematic. Following Bauman (1997) such promises of paradise rest on a utopian vision of work free from contradiction and ambivalence is a particular form of purity: “is a vision of things put in places *different* from those they would occupy if not prompted to move elsewhere, pushed, pulled or goaded” (p. 6). Further, the opposite of such purity (such as dirt and filth) has no place as “each order has its own disorder: each model of purity has its own dirt that needs to be swept away” (Bauman, 1997: 11) in order to preserve its utopian self-image.

With a more organizational flavour, ten Bos (2000) suggests that such utopian self-images are characterised by “essentials, fixed truths, in-depth analyses, causality, purity, procedure, malleability, escapism, control, reason and other things that occupy the scientist’s mind” (p. xiii). This attests to the view that capitalist market managerialism is a dangerous form of utopia that sublimates other possibilities in the construction of its own simulacral reality (see for example Parker, 2002).

Organizational utopianism might, as ten Bos and Kaulingfreks (2001)<sup>1</sup> argue, emanate from a more general cultural condition of ‘hosophobia’ – a fear of contamination and a resultant desire to curtail chaos, contingency, disorder, defilement and irrationality. Such hosophobia leads to organizations being idealized in an image of purity and hygiene where human passion and emotion are a threat to the ideal. The reality of organization is always positioned against such purified and ordered conditions which precede that reality (ten Bos and Kaulingfreks, 2001) – conditions like the possibility of ‘people first’. The effect of such idealism, however, is not that it is achieved, but rather it is pre-suppositions that are hoped for in their absence – truly a no-place that masquerades as a possible real place. Thus, despite the prevalence of utopian tendencies in the cultures of managerialism and management theory people in organizations do indeed, “refuse to live by the standards of the hidden utopia” (ten Bos 2000: 201). On this basis, ten Bos valorises the possibility of a more ‘fashionable’ management theory that might endorse “more imaginative, literary, lyric, or aesthetic understandings of excess, emotion, strategies, ideas, planning, rumor, formalism, gossip, joy and sadness in organizations” (p. 201). Rock music, I suggest, might be a place in which to find such a fashionable theory.

### **Rock and Utopia**

Commonly, critiques of utopian theories consider utopia as meaning being out of touch with reality (Mazlish, 2003) or related to projects that are seen as undesirable and which will end in ruin (Shklar, 1994). In rock, work related utopias seem to have undergone similar criticisms. If contemporary market managerial utopias celebrate imaginary accounts of “the heroic leader, the entrepreneur, the excellent company, the portfolio worker ... [who] ... surf the waves of change, understand global markets and find self-actualization’ (Parker, 2002: 4) an advocacy of such views is no where to be found in rock music. In terms of what can be found in rock, in this section I will examine three ways that utopia is thematically manifested in rock music. The first is the expression of work as a form of dystopia where rather than something to be desired, work is something to be escaped. The second is

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<sup>1</sup> ten Bos and Kaulingfreks (2001) is currently only available in Dutch; translated into English, the title of the book is *The Hygienic Machine: Comments on the Cult of Purity in Culture, Organization and Management*. Thanks to Rene ten Bos for discussions in regard to this book, for providing translations of the excerpts included here, and for his helpful comments on this paper.

the relationship between work and rock's great theme romantic love – in particular the entanglement and conflict of the work and love based utopias. The third is the appreciation of work as a false utopia where the cultural or political promises of work are seen to have been broken through the actual engagement with work. In each case, whereas purist visions of organizations see the passions, emotions and dreams of real people as their quintessential problem (ten Bos and Kaulingfreks, 2001), rock music that deals with work takes these issues as a central thematic.

### **Work as Dystopia: Escape From Work**

One common theme in rock music is a disdain for work such that it might be something to escape from either temporarily or permanently. Bored and alienated from the daily drudgery of working life, Australian band of the 1960s *The Easybeats* told us that they had “Friday on their minds”. Where every Monday they had to “do the five day grind once more”, but by Friday the youthful spirit emerges where “Tonight I’m gonna spend my bread; Tonight I’m gonna lose my head”. More than ten years later Bruce Springsteen was still singing “Monday morning when the foreman calls time; I’ve already got Friday on my mind”. These sentiments suggest a desire for temporary escape from work where if work is seen to have any value it is only in that it offers financial support for non-work activities. As blues rockers ZZ Top sang: “Just got paid today, got me a pocket full of change; If you believe I like workin’ hard all day, just step in my shoes and take my pay”. Or, as Billy Bragg bemoaned in 1983 – “The factory’s closed and the army’s full’ I don’t know what I’m going to do” – yet he still was reticent to replace work with a fully fledged Utopia – “I’m not looking for a new England, I’m just looking for another girl”.

Whereas the examples quoted above dream of a temporary escape from work, a more permanent vision of escape is exemplified in a song like *The Animals* 1960s hit “We gotta get out of this place”. The song chronicles a young man who finds himself in a part of the city where “the sun refused to shine” as he sings: “Watch my daddy in bed a-dyin’; Watched his hair been turnin’ grey; He’s been workin’ and slavin’ his life away”. Here the father figure presents an image of a possible future for the youthful singer – a life of hard work followed by a meaningless death. Given singer Eric Burdon’s

own background in working class Newcastle and his subsequent move to the USA through his musical success the parallels appear quite real. In considering the possibilities, the Burdon asserts:

*We gotta get out of this place; If it's the last thing we ever do*

*We gotta get out of this place; 'cause girl their's a better life for me an you*

The details of what this better place might be like are either undisclosed or unknown by the singer, as if the possibility of an alternative is the only possibility that can be considered. To think otherwise might be unbearable. The work that he knows, the work of his father, is the worst of all possible dystopian realities. This is an image that may well have rung true with others at the time, as another rocker Bruce Springsteen has said in interview:

Up until the late seventies, when I started to write songs that had to do with class issues, I was influenced more by music like The Animals' 'We Gotta Get Out of This Place' or 'It's My Life (And I'll Do What I Want)' – sort of class-conscious pop records that I'd listen to – and I'd say to myself: 'That's my life, that's my life!' The said something to me about my own experience of exclusion. I think that's been a theme that's run through much of my writing: the politics of exclusion (Springsteen quoted in Percy, 1998).

The movement away from work presaged by *The Animals* suggests the possibility of 'making it' elsewhere and an ability for music to "transport listeners away from there everyday lives" (Connell and Gibson, 2003: 73). This is a desire that sees work, especially working class work, as a dystopian reality that one might be able to escape from. It would seem here that the "happiness machine" and the order and purity of work that were alluded to earlier bear little positive trace in the image of work portrayed in rock. This same sentiment can be found in Australian band *Cold Chisel's* song, 'Bow River', although perhaps from a more adult position. Through singer Jimmy Barnes' screaming-cum-singing the protagonist of the song dreams of the utopia of Bow River where he won't be "Wastin' my days on the factory floor". For this character, however, the dream turns to reality:

*But only six days separates me and the great top end; I've been working hard, twelve hours a day*

*And the money I saved won't buy my youth again; Goin' for the heat babe, and the tropical rain*

*In a place where no man's puttin' on the dog for me*

...



*Gonna tell the man I don't want no more; Pick up a fast car and burn my name in the road*

*One week, two weeks maybe even more; Piss all my money up against a damn wall*

### **Work and Love**

Whereas rock music has dreamt of an escape from work, one might reasonably ask to where this escape might be directed. Consistent with rock's dominant themes it is romantic love that is so often the nemesis of work. Most often such songs, like most of rock, are sung by and from the perspective of men. When *The Beatles* had a 'Hard Day's Night' it was because that they had been "workin' like a dog"; but still the escape route is that "when I get home to you; I find the things that you do; will make me feel alright". When Bob Seger sang "I've been working" and "grinding it out for so long" the hopeful end was that "When I get home, you must be in my arms". A more complex example, though can be found in Roy Orbison's "Workin' For the Man". Orbison sings of work:

*Oh well I'm pickin' 'em up and I'm laying 'em down; I believe he's gonna work me to the ground*

*I'll pull to the left I heave to the right; I wanna kill him but it wouldn't be right*

This protagonist clearly despises his work and his boss, but he reconciles himself in his love affair with the boss's daughter who "sneaked him water" and "loved him right" as he dreamed of the day when his hard labour would be over "cause, the company and the daughter you see; Their gonna be mine; Yah I'm gonna be the man". This sentiment places work utopia in a deeply problematic intersection of work, sex, love, redemption, hatred and revenge. At the same time as it bemoans the experience of work, it includes the desire to turn the tables – where the worker becomes 'the man', yet doing so appears like a distant dream where such 'success' is not to be bought through the meritocratic rewards of hard work, but through the 'acquisition' of the boss's daughter. Orbison is not unique here, the relationship between work, love and sex is common.

Further, although more frequently presented by and from the perspective of men, Tracy Chapman's song 'Fast Car' bears a reflection on similar themes from a woman's perspective. In 'Fast Car' Chapman takes on the persona of a woman working as a 'checkout girl' in a local market. The song's addressee is her lover, who has no job. In a classic rock image dating back to Chuck Berry's "motor-vatin' down the road" Chapman's character dreams of an escape from her life

*You got a fast car; I want a ticket to anywhere*

*Maybe we make a deal; Maybe together we can get somewhere*

*Anyplace is better; Starting from zero got nothing to lose*

This dream of escape is one where Chapman fantasises about a modest plan to leave to the city where “You and I can both get jobs; And finally see what it means to be living”. But the dream of leaving does not amount to a fantasy of a woman being “rescued” by a man – this fast car is no white horse and it is he who stands in the way of her liberation. It is Chapman’s character who is planning the escape, he is an important part of this, a part that makes her feel that she belongs to something, belongs with someone, but it is she who imagines the agency of the escape. Further, the predicament she is in is very much a result of love gone bad when she tells us of how, when mother left her alcoholic father, she had to quit school to work and take care of him. Here we see family situations leading to a dead end job and a desperation from work that sees work not just as the utopia to be achieved, but as the dystopia from which to escape. Nevertheless such an escape is not positioned as being a complete break, the dreams that she has still bear the trace of a privileged culture to which she has no access:

*You'll find work and I'll get promoted; We'll move out of the shelter*

*Buy a big house and live in the suburbs; I remember we were driving, driving in your car*

*The speed so fast I felt like I was drunk*

But the reality of her life, the memory of her past and the dream of the future collide bitterly when she says of her lover:

*And I got a job that pays all our bills; You stay out drinking late at the bar:*

*See more of your friends than you do of your kids; I'd always hoped for better*

*Thought maybe together you and me would find it; I got no plans I ain't going nowhere*

*So take your fast car and keep on driving*

In the end, she says to him: “You gotta make a decision; You leave tonight or live and die this way”.

This is a story that “moves from the documentary to the personal in a song which tells of the need to escape and the hopelessness of knowing that it is simply a dream. It is a tale that speaks directly to the countless women who have cared for an alcoholic father, fall in love, plan for a better future only to

find, too late, that the husband is also a drinker, that life has a horrid habit of repeating itself” (Whitely, 2000: 176). Indeed, it is through work that this entrapment is also manifested – the work at the counter and the dream of either being promoted or getting a better job and a decent life. Here the dystopia of life itself is wrapped up in work and the things that this man could or would not do for this woman. This is not a song that celebrates the utopian potential of work, but one that chronicles the victims of a collision of work utopia and hard life.

### **Work as False Utopia: Broken Dreams**

In the rock and roll classic ‘Promised Land’ by Chuck Berry the persona of the ‘poor boy’ that Berry adopts is one who achieves an escape to utopia. He “left his home in Norfolk Virginia; California on his mind”. After chronicling his trip across continental north America, Berry’s character finally arrives in California and as he lands at the airport:

*Cut your engines, cool your wings; And let me make it to the telephone.*

*Los Angeles give me Norfolk Virginia; Tidewater four ten O nine*

*Tell the folks back home it’s the promised land callin’; And the poor boy’s on the line*

Although we do not find out what the promised land is like, Berry offers a song of hope where escape is possible. Berry, however, is an exception. The dream of escape, at least from work, is usually presented as being far more complex, ambiguous and difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. At an extreme this might take the position that *Planet Funk* sang about in 2003:

*I’ve never been to the USA; I am a slave for the minimum wage*

*Detroit, New York and L.A.; But I’m stuck in the U.K.*

Usually, it is somewhere in between these two extremes of Chuck Berry’s achievement and *Planet Funk*’s desperation that rock plays out its themes. In this space it is probably Bruce Springsteen who has, more than anyone else, taken work and utopia as a dominant thematic that runs through the entire corpus of his work from the late 1970s to today (see Rhodes, 2004). For Springsteen the core issue is the “murky reality of the American Dream ... [which contrasts] ... utopian impulses with people’s lack of opportunity to do much more than get by” (Frith, 1988: 98). In this sense “the bulk of Springsteen’s work uses class oppression as a vehicle for exploring the themes of individual survival ... He readily

sees ... the distance between the promise of the United States and the often painful reality” (Cowie, 2001: 115). Apparently borrowing, Chuck Berry’s song title, Springsteen’s ‘Promised Land’, for example, is complex and dark yet it compels a passionate understanding of people’s lives – their emotions their imaginings, their jobs and their play” (De Curtis 1992: 619). In the song “The Promised Land” Springsteen's character sings:

*I've done my best to live the right way; I get up every morning and go to work each day  
But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold; Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode  
Explode and tear this town apart; Explode and tear this pain from my heart*

Clearly, for Springsteen work is presented to him as an image of something that should be good and righteous, but in the face “working all day in my daddy’s garage” he is still “driving all night chasing some mirage”. This mirage, this image of the promised land, is the inescapable and alienating pursuit that he cannot avoid. With the promise of work broken, with “living the right way” not yielding to its end of the bargain, he wants to take that knife and cut the pain from his heart. Despite all of this he still asserts that “Mister I ain’t a boy no I’m a man; And I believe in the promised land”. The character realizes that work’s false promises is one that has torn him apart; but it’s also one that he does not know how to give up.

A Cullen (1997) puts it, the song chronicles a transition of “a relatively naïve white boy who is shocked to learn that the world is not his oyster” (p. 64) yet it ends with the realization that, despite everything, he still believes in the promised land. On close listening, one can be left with the feeling that the naiveté, which expects the promise to come true, is replaced by a knowledge that, despite evidence to the contrary, the belief is so ingrained, so central, that one must still believe and learn to live with the inability of the belief to be fulfilled. It might be that without the “dream”, however hollow, there would simply be nothing. The character is left to manage the ambivalence of the promised land whilst wishing for a storm that will:

*Blow away the dreams that tear you apart; Blow away the dreams that break your heart  
Blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and broken hearted.*

What Springsteen offers is a glimpse into the “everyday concerns and dreams of ordinary people, combined with a ... dose of social realism” (Shuker, 2001: 124) that enables him no so much to pontificate about Utopia both to speak to the troubling possibilities of its personal consequences

### **Concluding Comments**

The exemplary songs reviewed in this paper offer complex, personal and emotional exploration of what it might mean to wish for utopia and what that means in relation to the experience of a non-utopian lived reality. If utopianism “demonstrates both a relentless dissatisfaction with the here and now as well as a bewilderment about the possibility of thinking beyond the here and now” (Siebers, 1995: 3) then these songs are utopian. What they express is a sophisticated understanding of the cultural salience of utopia in a world that, despite protestations, refuses to be perfect. These are not images of purity, order and hygiene (c. ten Bos and Kaulingfreks 2001) but ones of dirt and desperation mixed in with the possibility of hope – hope that dreams of escape but is not so naïve as to expect the dream might come true in the glory of its perfection. To borrow a phrase from Bob Dylan, they explore life outside the gates of Eden when the potent imagery of those gates looms heavy.

It is perhaps the case that “People have always dreamed of a life of effortless abundance, peace, and well-being. The age of gold, the state of nature, the Garden of Eden: these dreams are as old as mankind itself” (Shklar, 1995: 41). With rock as our guide it would seem that post-war western utopias based on the presumed idealism of market managerialism have not engendered the utopia that they might have imagined. That’s not to say that such utopias are unimportant – clearly from our examples the dream of utopia is interwoven with that of lived experience and it is the relation between the two that the possible meanings of work emerge. This relation, however, seems not be one where the utopia is achieved, but rather one where it creates an Other for work that can lead as much to desperation as to motivation. Rock might teach us what it means to live outside the gates of Eden while still being unable to forget about the promise of those gates.

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