

“Dionysian Rock”

To be sure apart from all the hasty hopes and faulty applications to the present with which I spoiled my first book, there still remains the great Dionysian question mark I raised – regarding music as well: what would a music have to be like that would no longer be of romantic origin, like German music – but Dionysian? (Nietzsche 25).

With the benefit of hindsight, Nietzsche concedes in his “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” (added to the third edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*) that much of the contemporary mythopoeic ambition of his first book can be dismissed as youthful naïveté. Indeed, his subsequent critiques of nationalism, as well as his personal and public repudiations of Wagner, necessitate repositioning or distancing from certain key pleas Nietzsche makes in the later sections of the book. Walter Kaufmann rather apologetically notes “the book might well end” with section 15, before Nietzsche shifts from the birth and death of tragedy in antiquity to his romanticist cum modernist appeal for a rebirth (98). Kaufmann’s efforts to redeem Nietzsche from fascist affiliation renders the defense of Nietzsche’s most overt politically aestheticized hopes burdensome and problematic; embarrassing if not outright indefensible. But Nietzsche’s insistence that this great question mark remains should dismiss such simplistic apologetics. What hopes remained for Nietzsche, filtered out from those later dismissed as hasty and what applications to the present would he still consider in attempting an answer to that great Dionysian question mark?

By this point (1886) Nietzsche was deeply disillusioned with Bayreuth. If Wagner had failed him, so too was he now beyond the identification with Germany as a spiritual figure of collective historical destiny (as one finds eerily echoed in Heidegger's "Rectoral Address"). I don't want here to focus on this question concerning Germany – not out of any personal avoidance or repression of this question, but instead to move forward with Nietzsche by returning to what was a contemporary urgency by asking what remains as relevant and necessary. If the question of what would constitute an authentically Dionysian music remained unanswered in Nietzsche's lifetime, does it still?

To attempt an answer to this question we must negotiate a further question Nietzsche poses, in section 16 of *Birth of Tragedy*: "how is music related to image and concept?" Reducing this relationship to binary opposition analogous to body and soul isn't Nietzsche's intent. But for Nietzsche, music is "the immediate language of the will" (103) and is therefore pre-mimetic – perhaps one might employ Kristeva's terms semiotic whereas the mimetic arts are inherently symbolic. This is not to say that Dionysian music would be pure sound without signification, for as Nietzsche explains:

music incites to the *symbolic intuition* of Dionysian universality, and music allows the symbolic image to emerge *in its highest significance*. From these facts, intelligible in themselves and not inaccessible to a more penetrating examination, I infer the capacity of music to give birth to *myth* (the most significant example) and particularly the *tragic* myth: the myth which expresses Dionysian knowledge in symbols. (103)

So there is an intimate correspondence between the nature and power of a given musical modality and the imagistic states that emerge organically from this sonic condition. Using Heidegger's terms from "The Origin of the Work of Art," music is the earth from which certain worlds appear. The Dionysian world view, then, must come from a certain musical sensibility, and a correspondence or synthesis must unite sound and concept.

Nietzsche's meditation, initially optimistic about the mythopoetic ambitions of the Wagnerian project, is nonetheless *untimely*, a promise or a prospect to be realized in the future. Not yet faintly heard in the distance, Nietzsche's concept precedes the sound that will provide the ground for the fully realized, if reborn, Dionysian musical-conceptual aesthetic. This must be a music that doesn't promote otherworldly hopes or celebrate spiritual release from the physical. And Nietzsche is culturally confined to conceive precisely of another musicality that would reject the bifurcation of spirit and flesh as the basis of the onto-theo-logical. Rather than seeking release from the phenomenal into the numenal, or the individual soul overcoming the sufferings of the flesh, an authentically Dionysian artform would profoundly affirm Being:

We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena, now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will. We are pierced by the maddening sting of these pains just when we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence, and when we anticipate, in Dionysian ecstasy, the indestructibility and eternity of this joy. In spite of pity and fear, we are the happy living beings,

not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose creative joy we are united. (104-5)

Dionysian art offers (*opfer*) finite transcendence, an exquisite ecstatic affirmation of being that marks loss of self as the fate of selfhood, taking suffering as the condition for joy and daring delight in despair, a tragic wisdom that celebrates existence in saying YES to all that happens.

Nietzsche can only imagine such an aesthetic as lost in antiquity to be found in futurity. “Let us imagine a coming generation with such intrepidity of vision, with such a heroic penchant for the tremendous; let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-slayers, the proud audacity with which they turn their back on all the weaklings’ doctrines of optimism in order to ‘live resolutely in wholeness and fullness,’” (112-3) he prophetically projects towards another time, another generation than his own.

The madman who proclaims the death of God asks what sacred games and festivals must be invented in the wake of such a world-historical cataclysm. In our post-theological cultural landscape, Nietzsche’s influence is inestimable, as artists have in various media attempted to answer the call for new artforms proclaiming new values. Has such a generation come since Nietzsche’s oracular plea for Dionysian music?

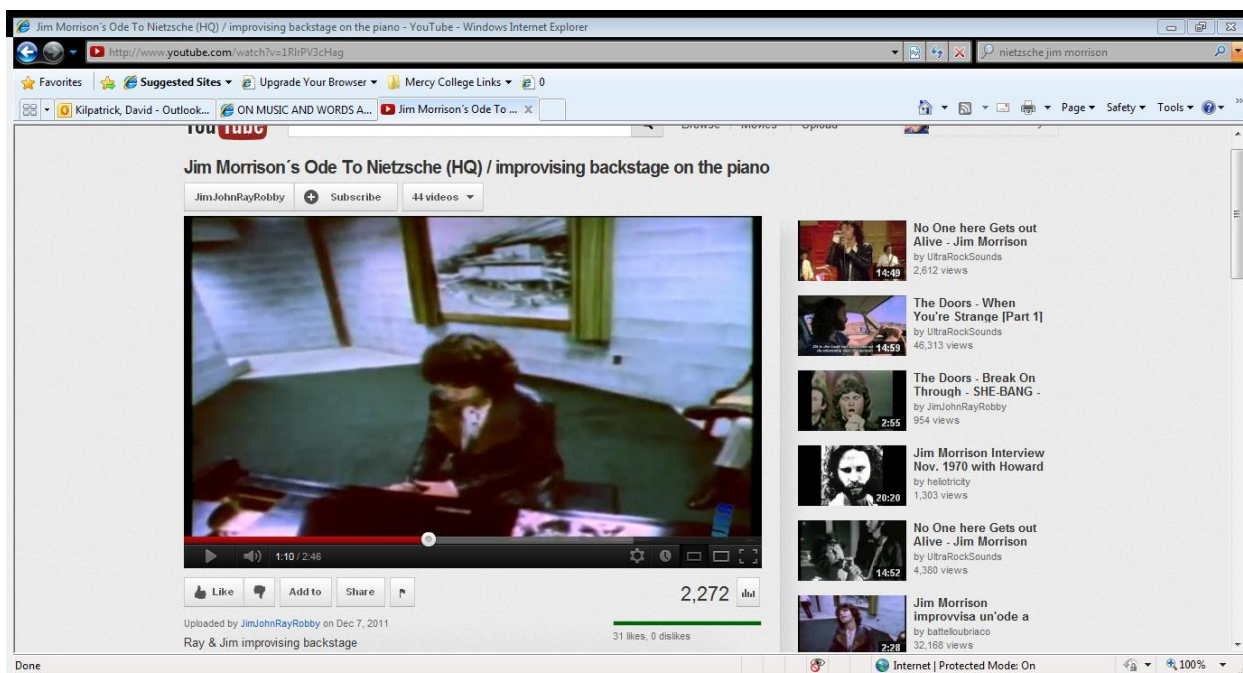
I would like to entertain the thought that such music has indeed arrived as a particular strain of rock, that the trinity of Christianity has its contemporary antidote in the Dionysian trinity of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll. To state this case I will not attempt an exhaustive or exclusive list of artists, but will simply explore three examples of bands that pursue, if not fulfill, Nietzsche’s vision of Dionysian music. I hope to provoke debate and stimulate reflection in such a way that will conjure other examples, but will focus now on The Doors, Led Zeppelin and

Jane's Addiction as exemplary Dionysian artists whose music both sonically and conceptually aspires to and arguably embodies this Nietzschean aesthetic.

Jim Morrison of the Doors is perhaps the most obvious choice, for he is the one rock star most well-known for the profound Nietzschean influence on his lyrics and performance, given his frequent references to Nietzsche, both as allusions in lyric and as aesthetic explanations in interviews. Biographies of Morrison testify to the profound Nietzschean influence on the Doors' vocalist-lyricist. In *No One Here Gets Out Alive* by Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman, we are told Morrison "devoured Friedrich Nietzsche, the poetic German philosopher whose views on aesthetics, morality, and the Apollinian-Dionysian duality would appear again and again in Jim's conversation, poetry, songs and life" (17). In *Break on Through*, James Riordan notes that Morrison began reading Nietzsche "when he was about sixteen" (38). Doors co-founder and keyboardist Ray Manzarek is quoted in Stephen Davis's *Jim Morrison: Life, Death, Legend* as saying, "Friedrich Nietzsche killed Jim Morrison" (ch.1, ebook). And in drummer John Densmore's autobiography, *Riders on the Storm*, he makes it clear how coming to terms with the legacy of his deceased bandmate, whom he calls at times "Dionysus," requires coming to terms with Nietzsche. "I'm glad I didn't understand Jim's mentor Friedrich Nietzsche when I was twenty-one," Densmore reflects, "Nietzsche was destroyed by the dark side because he went deeper into it than anyone until then. Explorers pay a price because they go farther than their mentors into unexplored territory. Nietzsche held the flame up into one of the corners of darkness and then the flame went out" (315-6). If Densmore blames Morrison's demise on Nietzsche, he still nonetheless recognizes both their deaths as Dionysian sacrifices.

Morrison's obsession with Nietzsche as a figure of tragic myth is evident in a backstage improvisation on 1 September 1968 at SPAC (Saratoga Springs, NY), captured on film for the

documentary *Feast of Friends* (directed by Paul Ferrara, 1968). He bangs away at a piano, mimicking Nietzsche's own playing after succumbing to madness in the market square of Turin, embracing a horse as it was being beaten:



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RlrPV3cHag>

He threw his arms around the horse's neck and kissed him everywhere/ I love my horse/ A crowd gathered, his landlord appeared and took Frederick back up to his room on the second floor/ where he began to play the piano madly and sing madly like/ ooooooh.....I'm crucified and inspected and resurrected and if you don't believe that i'll give you my latest philanthropic sonata/ and the landlord's family was amazed so they sent for his friend Overbeck/ and he got there in three days by coach/ and they took Frederick to the asylum/ and his mother joined him/

and for the next fifteen years, they cried and cried and laughed and looked at the Sun. (qtd. *Feast of Friends*)

While this simultaneously conveys how deeply an impression Nietzsche's biography had on Morrison while educating and humoring his bandmates (and surely with an eye to the film's audience), one may be tempted to say that with his non-verbal vocalizations and piano pounding that he is attempting a purely Dionysian musicality.

I would instead suggest that the Doors music offers plentiful examples of attempts at a conscious synthesis of Dionysian and Apollinian elements. Just as Morrison and the Doors might be the most obvious example of rock's Nietzschean influence, "The End" from their self-titled first album might well be the most obvious instance of an attempt to revive tragic art, with its revision of the Oedipal myth: "The killer awake before dawn/He put his boots on/He took a face from the ancient gallery/And he walked on down the hall." While rock had already dared to celebrate hedonism and liberation of all kinds, with "The End" the doors tapped into darker terrain, uncharted since the ancients, mining the tragic to provoke a modernist mythopoetics.

With the title-track from *The Soft Parade*, we are taken on a wild jungle ride into the heart of the carnivalesque. The track opens with Morrison impersonating a preacher, who rejects the theological proposition "you can petition the Lord with prayer." The song proceeds as the lyrics conjure disparate images, the pulsing rhythm of the band propelling the listener towards a trance-like state as Morrison's vocal overdubs overlap one another at the song's crescendo:

We need someone or something new/ Something else to get us through, yeah,
c'mon /Callin' on the dogs/ Callin' on the dogs/ Oh, it's gettin' harder/ Callin' on
the dogs/ Callin' in the dogs/Callin' all the dogs/Callin' on the gods/You gotta

meet me/Too late, baby/Slay a few animals/At the crossroads/Too late/All in the
 yard/But it's gettin' harder/By the crossroads/You gotta meet me /Oh, we're goin',
 we're goin great [/Greek?]

Here is a form of music entirely alien to Nietzsche's cultural context, not a full century prior. The Doors stare into the abyss with a sonic ode to savage reverie as an antidote to the modern condition.

What's important to note is how frequently the lead singer is likened to a god, by his bandmates and by the band's audience and critics. Morrison, though the power of the music, is transformed and, in Nietzsche's words, "in this magic transformation the Dionysian reveler sees himself as a satyr, and as a satyr, in turn, he sees the god" (64). And just as Nietzsche attempts to resolve the "problem" of the lyrist (48), we see that Morrison isn't engaging in solipsistic ego-gratification but instead, "as a Dionysian artist he has identified himself with the primal unity" (49). The rock concert becomes a sacred ritual that triggers transformation.

Another rock star often compared to a god in performance is Robert Plant, the vocalist-lyricist of Led Zeppelin, once famously (with perhaps a tragic sense of hubris) proclaiming "I'M A GOLDEN GOD" (Davis *LZ*- '75 147). While the band was at its creative peak, on tour in 1975 in New York, Plant confessed in a Rolling Stone interview with Cameron Crowe that despite their reputations for touring debauchery, "Nowadays we're more into staying in our rooms and reading Nietzsche" (qtd. Crowe). This acknowledgement should be understood as every bit as genuine as Morrison's claims to the Nietzschean legacy.

As with the Doors, numerous Zeppelin songs communicate and/or trigger an ecstatic state of consciousness, while powerfully exploring and deeply exploring the nature of suffering. The

opening strains of “The Immigrant Song” with their vague references to Nordic myth may be viewed as a sonic pre-linguistic engagement with a tragic power. Likewise, “Nobody’s Fault But Mine” opens with voice and synthesized guitar mimicking one another, the lyric emerging out of the sonic setting. With both songs, we hear how rock vocalization at its finest functions in a semiotic pre-symbolic manner, exposing the wound of anguish and paradoxically celebrating such despair.

Both the Doors and Led Zeppelin, along with their classic rock peers, were eventually dismissed by the punk movement as dinosaurs, boring old farts with pretentious aesthetic ambitions. Did their generation truly embody and realize the aesthetic project envisioned by Nietzsche and, if so, had it exhausted itself?

Jane’s Addiction emerged in the late-80s Los Angeles scene as the descendents of the Doors-Zep legacy. The frenzy of “Mountain Song,” the first track released from their debut studio album, *Nothing’s Shocking*, is like a Bacchic hymn to excess and transgression. “Had a Dad” tells of a struggle for new values and direction now that “my daddy has gone away,” revealing during the bridge that “God is dead...he’s not there at all, oh yeah.” And on their second album, *Ritual de lo Habitual*, on “Ain’t No Right,” the lyrics move beyond good and evil for “there ain’t no wrong now/ain’t no right/there’s only pleasure and pain.” As with the Doors and Led Zeppelin, the voice often conjures sound without words, and the words themselves out of the primal chaos generated from the music, leading the musicians and audience alike into a frenzied state of vital engagement with existence affirmed without discretion.

Like Morrison and Plant before him, Perry Farrell is often described as god-like in performance, an androgynous and dangerous sexuality that threatens contagion among the

audience. Along with lyrical allusions, the connection to Nietzschean themes and concerns is perhaps most overt in a poetry reading at the Probe in Hollywood in August of 1988 where he distributed tampons with “God is dead” written on them with red ink (Mullen 182). With Jane’s Addiction and other projects, such as the Lollapalooza Festival, Farrell has consistently pushed the boundaries of social norms and mores to provoke and promote a radically transformative sociopolitical movement. On tour now, Jane’s Addiction continue the legacy of Dionysian rock.

I offer these samples of rock stars as transgressive gods for their sonic and conceptual emphases, but also for their behavioral rejection of conventional morality, daring to experiment wildly with consciousness and morality, embodying a Nietzschean-Dionysian spirit of ecstatic liberation. Whether or not the question of Dionysian music has indeed been answered, whether or not the generation of tragic artists envisioned by Nietzsche has indeed arrived, remains present, or is now confined to an immediate past, are questions I hope to leave you with.

“Rock is dead they say. Long live rock!”

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