



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Death, Travel and Pocahontas

The imagery on Neil Young's album Rust Never Sleeps

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

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Abstract

The following essay, “Death, Travel and Pocahontas,” seeks to interpret the imagery on Neil Young’s album *Rust Never Sleeps*. The album was released in July 1979 and with it Young was venturing into a dialogue of folk music and rock music. On side one of the album the sound is acoustic and simple, reminiscent of the folk genre whereas on side two Young is accompanied by his band, The Crazy Horse, and the sound is electric, reminiscent of the rock genre. By doing this, Young is establishing the music and questions of genre and the interconnectivity between folk music and rock music as one of the theme’s of the album.

Young explores these ideas even further in the imagery of the lyrics on the album by using popular culture icons. The title of the album alone symbolizes the idea of both death and mortality, declaring that originality is transitory. Furthermore he uses recurring images, such as death, to portray his criticism on the music business and lack of originality in contemporary musicians. Ideas of artistic freedom are portrayed through images such as nature and travel using both ships and road to symbolize the importance of re-invention.

In conclusion, this essay portrays how Young’s ideas are echoed throughout the album both through the use of imagery and by the use of two distinctive genres.

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Introduction

“My my, hey hey / Rock and roll is here to stay.” These words follow the first sounds of Neil Young’s guitar on song number one on his album *Rust Never Sleeps*. “It’s better to burn out / than to fade away / My my, hey hey.” He sings on, the song featuring only his guitar and mouth organ and of course his distinctive voice. With his minimal “folkie” sound accompanied by the direct reference of the lyrics to rock and roll, Young was venturing into a dialogue of folk music and rock and roll and even punk rock. The album was released in July 1979 and at that time this dialogue had been going on for two decades, a dialogue very much centred on questions of authenticity and originality. This interpretation is even supported further by the fact that one side of the album *Rust Never Sleeps* (the vinyl version that is), is acoustic and simple, almost “folkie,” whereas on the other side, Young is accompanied by his band The Crazy Horse, the sound is electric and therefore more “rock and roll.”¹

Neil Young was born November 22nd 1945 in Toronto, Canada. After his parents’ divorce he moved with his mother to Winnipeg, Manitoba.² Since the beginning of his music career Young has always travelled on the border between rock music and folk music, having roots in both genres. In high school he was in several instrumental rock bands, and one of them, The Squires, even had a local hit song in Winnipeg, but as he grew older he started playing in folk clubs, befriending artists, such as Joni Mitchell, who were considered to be folk artists.³ It has to be said, though, that Young has always avoided repeating himself and has experimented with almost every music genre there is, such as electronica, swing, rockabilly, soul and jazz, but these ventures have always echoed a connection with either rock or folk music. Throughout his experiments he has always come back to these roots. Young has in his music career managed to show the interconnectivity between these music genres and how, in fact, they each represent a certain reinvention of expression, whether it is within the received genres or through their further development.

¹ Nigel Williamson, *Journey through the past: the stories behind the classic songs of Neil Young* (London: Carlton Books, 2002), p. 76.

² Jimmi McDonough, *Shakey: Neil Young’s Biography* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 37-70.

³ Same source, pp. 85-116.

In this essay, I would like to argue that these ideas of interconnectivity, between folk music and rock music, are apparent on the album *Rust Never Sleeps*. These ideas become portrayed through Young's imagery in his lyrics. The lyrics on the album contain various references to American culture, touching upon images ranging from Native Americans to popular contemporary (at the time) cultural icons like Marlon Brando. The lyrics contain strong binary oppositions, Young setting up Native Americans against popular culture, the nature against the city, and even artistic freedom against the interference of record companies, who in their quest for larger markets and more profits, tend to push musicians into certain artistic directions which can result in the loss of originality. It all boils down to the question of originality and authenticity and perhaps the question of origin.

These questions of authenticity and originality, the dialogue on folk music and rock music, as well as general ideas on genre, bring us to an extensive discourse on popular music which is very interesting in itself. This essay will demonstrate that on one hand the discourse focuses on questions on how to write about popular music and on the other hand the discourse is centred on questions of value; what is the value of music and what music is of value? Early critics, like Theodor W. Adorno, denied popular music any importance and emphasized the artistic relevance of classical music instead. Adorno used classical musicology to analyze popular music, as well as classical, and on those grounds the argument may seem plausible.⁴ Later critics have however pointed out that classical musicology is not suitable for analysis of popular music on the grounds of its limitation, as musicology mostly focuses on elements like refrain and tone complexity, completely overlooking the elements like lyrics, sound, look, etc. This has resulted in an academic debate on which elements of music are important and which approach to music analysis is most suitable.⁵

In order to do an effective analysis of the imagery on an album like *Rust Never Sleeps*, it is important to answer these questions, although the focus in this essay will mostly be on the imagery. Which elements are important when one makes an interpretation of an album; which elements affect the meaning of the lyrics? Literary theorists analyzing popular music have been criticized for looking only at this one

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, "On popular music," *On Record: Rock, Pop & the Written Word*, eds Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 301-214.

⁵ Susan McClary and Robert Walser, "Start Making Sense! Musicology wrestles with rock," *On Record: Rock, Pop & the Written Word*, eds Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 277-292.

aspect. In their quest for a meaning, an interpretation, they tend to look only at the lyrics of a song, overlooking other elements and characteristics such as how the music is performed, what parts of the lyrics are stressed when performed etc. It is therefore important to look at this discourse on approaches to music analysis and try to answer these questions. Only when they have been answered can the analysis of the imagery be successful.

The debate and questions mentioned above have therefore the task of justifying my search for meaning on Neil Young's *Rust Never Sleeps*. For, as stated above, the imagery in the lyrics show a certain consistency and has a certain tone which can be seen in relations to the music it accompanies. This is done with use of references as well as the use of recurring images. Among these is the image of death and mortality as well as the image of travel and freedom. Even in those first lines mentioned in the beginning of the essay, we are faced with an image of mortality: "It's better to burn out / Than to fade away." So why use this image and what is it supposed to signify? How does this imagery connect to the dialogue on rock and folk music, on authenticity and originality? Is it perhaps supposed to refer to the death of originality, the death of authenticity, and with that the death of artistic freedom?

In this essay, I will seek to answer these questions. The first part of the essay will focus on how to write about music and the theories on the subject. Then the essay will demonstrate the relevance of lyrical analysis and the social realism in lyrics. In the last part of the essay my discussion will draw into focus how aforementioned questions of originality are portrayed in the imagery on the album *Rust Never Sleeps*.

Writing about popular music

"The music plays, the body moves. No cultural code required, thank you very much."

- Susan McClary and Robert Walser

In their essay "Start making sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock," Susan McClary and Robert Walser write: "Though the point has often been made, it is still easy to forget that music is an especially resistant medium to write or speak about." They claim that although music is in some ways similar to speech, both in sound and mode of

producing meaning, it differs considerably from the pattern of verbal language. “One of the principal differences, for instance, is that music relies on events and inflections occurring on many interdependent levels (melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre, texture, etc.) *simultaneously* (sic),” they maintain.⁶ This complexity makes it difficult to isolate a specific element of a song and the meaning it conveys as the elements have different ways of being interpreted. For example one would approach the melody from a musicological point of view, whereas the lyrics could be approached through various other points of view such as literary theory or sociology. This makes it more important to establish at the beginning how one is going to approach an album like *Rust Never Sleeps*.

It is not only the complexity of music that makes it a resistant medium to write or speak about; there are other elements making it even more difficult. McClary and Walser argue that “the task is made even more difficult by the fact that the music one’s own culture often seems completely transparent. Music appears to create its effects directly, without any mediation whatsoever.” Accordingly, listeners are often not even aware of any interpretations on their part. Furthermore they conclude the following: “Moreover, it is precisely this illusion that one experiences one’s own subjectivity or a collective subjectivity in music that is most prized.”⁷

Theodor Adorno, who was a leading figure in the Frankfurt school, presents his ideas on this collective subjectivity in his essay “On Popular Music.” He claims that this illusion is only inherent in popular music and is a part of how it is produced. He insists that popular music has a standard reaction built into it and that it is pre-digested. To Adorno this is a negative element and has to do with popular music’s lack of originality, a point which will be discussed later in this essay.⁸ McClary and Walser on the other hand don’t see this as a negative aspect and claim it is an element of all music, not only popular. Instead they claim this is what gives music “its peculiar power and prestige in society” and what makes it hard to write and talk about.⁹

Peculiar power and prestige, the notion of mystification, is what drives those who try to study popular music to musicology, state McClary and Walser, but this element also creates a certain problem. Although music criticism has some of the same procedures as literary and film criticism, “equivalents of colors, characters, or camera

⁶ “Start Making Sense!,” *On Record*, p. 278.

⁷ Same source, p. 278.

⁸ “On Popular Music,” *On Record*, p. 305.

⁹ “Start Making Sense!,” *On Record*, p. 278.

angles are explicable only up against abstractions in sound organization-abstractions that virtually all members of society manage to absorb and internalize from an early age, but for which they have no conscious awareness and no vocabulary by means of which to verbalize their responses.”¹⁰ This means that one has to turn to musicology but in result the music is simplified and various elements are overlooked. The explanation of the musicology turns often out to say less about the music than one would have expected. McClary and Walser write:

For the sad fact is that what created a particular effect in a piece of music-an effect so powerful that it can make an arena full of nonmusicians jump to their feet and scream with ecstasy-can be the result of an E-natural rather than an E-flat or an anticipation of a mere thirty-second notes duration. The sociologist who has jumped up with excitement but who is cautious to understand such reflexes in material terms turns to the adjacent musicologist and asks: “How did that happen?” The musicologist calmly replies: “You were expecting an E-flat, and he sang an E-natural.” And the sociologist explodes because she knows perfectly well that she was not expecting an E-flat, that in fact she would not know an E-flat from a hole in the wall...¹¹

The passage above demonstrates very well some of the problems we face when writing about music.

In what follows, I will not try to propose solutions to these problems McClary and Walser suggest, but it is necessary to be aware of them. As proposed in the introduction, one of the elements on *Rust Never Sleeps*, that contributes to the meaning, is how the music itself, the sound, is used; hence musicology is not easily overlooked. As mentioned earlier, one side of the album is just Neil Young and an acoustic guitar and mouth organ, whereas on the other side he is accompanied by his band The Crazy Horse and the sound is electric. How does that contribute to the meaning of the album and to the interpretation presented in this essay? I would like to argue that these elements contribute to the themes of the album and that they are interlinked with the questions of originality and authenticity although at first hand these questions seem to be most present in the imagery of the lyrics. The questions of originality and authenticity bring us to the discourse on what the value of popular music is and what music is of value.

¹⁰ “Start Making Sense!,” *On Record*, p. 279.

¹¹ Same source, p. 279.

Traditional musicology and popular music

The question of the value of popular music, and all music in general, is a difficult one to approach. Adorno has written a great deal on popular music and in his research explored questions of its value. In his aforementioned essay, “On Popular Music”, first published in 1941, Adorno praises classical music but denies popular music any real relevance. In an essay where the goal is to analyze popular music, it may seem odd to level criticism at it, but there are good reasons for doing so. For Adorno presents both a terminology and a certain ideology that lays a foundation for modern music theory, however faulty his conclusions may seem. His research on popular music is therefore not easily overturned. In his criticism he focuses on elements, which interestingly enough, seem to be the very same elements of popular music that Young criticises through his imagery, namely the lack of originality.

According to Adorno, there is a vast gap between the value of classical, which he terms “serious” music, and popular music. He writes:

Popular music, which produces the stimuli we are here investigating, is usually characterized by its difference from serious music. This difference is generally taken for granted and is looked upon as a difference of levels considered so well defined that most people regard the values within them as totally independent of one another.¹²

He argues, that the difference he is referring to lies in “the fundamental characteristics of popular music,” namely the standardization, a key concept in Adorno’s argument. “The whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent.”¹³ With this argument, Adorno dismisses any authenticity or originality in popular music, arguing that it is always structured by standardization.

In support of his argument, Adorno points out that the chorus in most songs consists of thirty-two bars and the range of the songs are mostly limited to one octave and one note.¹⁴ He adds that the most important feature, the harmonic cornerstone of

¹² “On Popular Music,” *On Record*, p. 301.

¹³ Same source, p. 302.

¹⁴ Bear in mind that the essay “On Popular Music” was published in 1941 and contemporary popular music song structure has changed variably since then although many songs still follow this general formula.

each hit, which is the beginning and the end part, must beat out the standard scheme. “This inexorable device guarantees that regardless of what aberrations occur, the hit will lead back to the same familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced.”¹⁵ This demonstrates very well how Adorno dismisses authenticity and originality as key elements of popular music.

What differentiates it furthermore, according to Adorno, is how in serious music the stress is placed upon the whole as a musical event. He characterizes it accordingly: “Every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme.”¹⁶ In his view the limitation of popular music is that no significance is put on any part of the song, it would not affect the musical sense if any detail were taken out or changed. Instead the listener supplies a framework automatically “since it is a mere musical automatism itself [...] in popular music position is absolute. Every detail is substitutable, it serves its function only as a cog in a machine.”¹⁷ The concept of automatism is an essential element of Adorno’s idea of standardization in popular music.

This key idea, standardization, refers to more than simply the structure of popular music. For Adorno argues that this standardization is also a result of the production of popular music, as well as affecting the reception of it. “*Structural Standardization aims at Standard reaction* (sic)” he writes.¹⁸ He claims that popular music is composed in such a way that a standard reaction is built into its composition. “The composition hears for the listener,” he argues, making any effort in listening unnecessary since the schematic build-up in the music dictates the way in which one listens. In this sense popular music can be said to be pre-digested.¹⁹

While Adorno’s ideas on popular music are based on his analysis as a musicologist, it has been established earlier in this essay that an analysis based solely on musicology overlooks a whole aspect of the music and is therefore limiting. Having said that, his ideas on standardization, however flawed they are as a criticisms supported with arguments from musicology, do present certain ideas that can be applied to later ideas on authenticity and originality. These are ideas that have been debated throughout

¹⁵ “On popular music,” *On Record*, p. 302.

¹⁶ Same source, p. 303.

¹⁷ Same source, p. 303.

¹⁸ Same source, p. 305.

¹⁹ Same source, p. 306.

music history and even to this day. This essay seeks to disclose that ideas on authenticity and originality are present on the album *Rust Never Sleeps* in both the music and the lyrics. This essay seeks to determine whether Young is in fact criticising the “standardization” of the music industry on this album.

The relevance of lyrics

Because popular music, and all music for that matter, is so difficult to write about, the tendency has been to rely too heavily on the lyrics. According to McClary and Walser this should come as no surprise, for “the verbal dimension of a song is much more readily grasped and discussed in terms of meaning. Our techniques for dealing with texts are far better developed at this point, and they do not (or *need* not, anyway) involve the difficulty of mediating through a cumbersome professional jargon.” They claim that in much of popular music the text is not what it is constructed in service of and that excessive emphasis on text may lead to skewed perceptions. However they do acknowledge that this may differ between music genres and mention that, for example, in country music the communication through the lyrics is considered a crucial part whereas in heavy metal the lyrics are often not even intelligible.²⁰ This means that the element of genre is important when analysing popular music, hence placing an album or a song within a certain genre adds to the interpretation.

Adorno goes even further than McClary and Walser by dismissing the importance of lyrics altogether. He claims that the lyrics only portray a certain “character,” which he coins “mother songs, home songs, nonsense or ‘novelty’ songs, pseudo-nursery rhymes, laments for a lost girl.” To him the idea of social and political meaning in the lyrics is impossible, for popular music is a medium which deprives it of any social significance.²¹ Although I have purposely dismissed Adorno’s theories on the grounds that they are based on musicological analysis, his ideas of “character” songs hold a similarity to later date ideas on genre and lyrical realism, which will be explored further in the next chapter of the essay.

²⁰ “Start Making Sense!,” *On Record*, pp. 285-286.

²¹ “On Popular Music,” *On Record*, p. 302.

Simon Frith argues in “Why Do Songs Have Words” that in fact genre plays a very important role in how we analyse music. He writes:

Firstly, in analysing song words we must refer to the performing conventions which are used to construct our sense of both the singers and ourselves, as listeners. It is not just what they sing, but the way they sing it, that determines what singers mean to us and how we are placed, as an audience, in relationship to them. Secondly, in raising questions of identity and audience I am, implicitly, raising question of genre – different people use different music to experience (or fantasize) different sorts of community; different pop forms (disco, punk, country, rock, etc.) engage their listeners in different narratives of desire.²²

His ideas are relevant to the analysis on *Rust Never Sleeps*, for as Young divides the album into two parts, one side acoustic and reminiscent of folk music, and the other side electronic; pure rock’n’roll, he is purposely placing his album in two distinctive genres. This placement of the album in two genres therefore adds to the meaning and will be explored later in the essay.

Social realism and folk music

“The supreme irony must be when the bored housewife whiles away her duller tasks, half-consciously intoning the otherwise very forgettable words of some pulp lovesong. How many of them stop to assess the real consequences of the fact that ‘all who love are blind’ or just how much they have to blame that ‘something here inside’ for? What songs do you sing, when your heart is no longer on fire and smoke no longer mercifully blinds you to the banal realities of you situation? (But of course there are no songs for that).”

- Germaine Greer

The discourse on lyrical realism, a subject which Frith discusses, is of importance. He writes: “At its simplest, the theory of lyrical realism means asserting a direct relationship between a lyric and the social or emotional condition it describes and

²² Simon Frith, “Why Do Songs Hace Words?,” *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 120-121.

presents.” To support his argument he takes folk song studies as an example and says that they work with the assumption that folk songs are a historical record of popular consciousness. “The question is how does folk ‘consolidation’ differ from pop ‘escapism’. The answer lies in the modes of production involved: folk songs were authentic fantasies because they sprang from the people themselves; they were not commodities.”²³ In support of this idea Frith quotes A. L. Lloyd who argues that with the development of industrial capitalism “the song-proper becomes the most characteristic lyrical form through which the common people express their fantasies, their codes, their aspirations.”

According to Frith, Lloyd contrasts the “banal stereotype of lower-class life and limited range of sickly bourgeois fantasies that the by-now powerful entertainment industry offers its audience to suck on like a sugared rubber teat” to the authenticity of folk music.²⁴ But to this argument Frith proposed a problem which lies in its circularity. He writes:

Folk ‘authenticity’ is rooted in folk songs’ ‘real’ origins, but we recognize these origins by the songs’ authenticity and, in practice, the assessment of a song’s realism is an assessment of its use of assumed *conventions* of realism. Folk song collections are folk song selections, and, to be chosen as authentic, songs have to meet a literary or political criteria - authenticity lies in a particular use of language, a particular treatment of narrative and imagery, a particular ideological position. The problem, then is not whether folk songs *did* reflect real social conditions, but why some such reflections are taken by collectors to be authentic, some not.²⁵

The question of authenticity is a question of ideology and eventually a political problem. On the question whether lyrical realism is a matter of accurate surface description or getting behind appearances, challenging given cultural forms, Frith quotes Taylor and Lange who argue “that ‘cultural production occurs always in relation to ideology and not to the “real world.””²⁶

If we look at the imagery of the songs on *Rust Never Sleeps* it becomes apparent that the album does not present us with the “real world.” However, when looking at Frith’s ideas on genre, it becomes apparent that it does present us with an ideology.

²³ “Why Do Songs Have Words?,” *Music for Pleasure*), p. 112.

²⁴ Same source, p. 112.

²⁵ Same source, pp. 112-113.

²⁶ Same source, p. 113.

Rust never sleeps

“With its odd, affecting scenes of past, present and future, Rust Never Sleeps was, in many ways, Young’s most psychedelic canvas yet - American history by way of a bong hit.”

- Jimmy McDonough

One could easily claim that the title of the album says it all. It incorporates the main themes of the album; how originality is transitory. There is a history behind the words for they are not Young’s. According to his biography, Young was at the time jamming with a punk band called Devo, which had caught his attention. When playing the song “Hey hey, my my” the singer of the band added the words “rust never sleeps” to the lyrics. The slogan was originally from a promotion for an automobile-rust-proofing outfit which Devo had worked on. Young later interpreted it in his own way and said about it: “I can relate to ‘Rust never sleeps.’ It relates to my career. The longer I keep going, the longer I have to fight this corrosion,” making it a theme for his album.”²⁷

The imagery of the words “rust never sleeps” is very vivid. Rust is the element that spares nothing and by reminding us that it never sleeps, its forces are always at work, it refers to mortality. Rust effects metal which brings us to a notion of modernity, of civilization, effects of man. By referring to the ever presence of nature’s power over man’s inventions, Young is portraying a certain fragility. The word sleep is generally a euphemism for death, giving the sentence its gore effect. It presents a feeling that “rust” is inevitable and this inevitability refers to the degeneration of originality.

The words “rust never sleeps” therefore sums up the theme of the album and is echoed throughout the album in its imagery.

²⁷ *Shakey*, p. 531.

Side one: death, travel and Pocahontas

The first song on the album, “My my, hey hey (out of the blue)”, echoes the same ideas on originality as the title. The first lines of the song are:

My my, hey hey
Rock and roll is there to stay
It's better to burn out
Than to fade away
My my, hey hey

The second line, as sung by Young, alone playing the guitar, is more an exclamation than an assertion. First he states that rock and roll is here to stay but in the next line he speaks of perishing, a line demonstrating his core idea presented in the title of the album. As in the title the idea that existence is transitory is present. The imagery used symbolises both mortality and immortality. The reference to rock and roll in the first song of the album states the music (and music industry) as the subject of the album. The next stanza goes like this:

It's out of the blue and into the black
They give you this, but you pay for that
And once you're gone you can never come back
When you're out of the blue
And into the black

Here Young uses the metaphor blue, as the negative, and the black represents the unknown in an ambiguous way. The black is here both death, obscurity, as seen in the third line, but also the idea of challenging oneself and re-invention, by going into the black, the unknown and leaving the comfort of what is familiar. The reference to payment establishes the idea of consumerism and thereby refers to the music industry. In next stanza this reference to the music industry is even stronger:

The king is gone but he's not forgotten
This is the story of a Johnny Rotten
It's better to burn out than it is to rust
The king is gone but he's not forgotten

The king refers to Elvis Presley, who died in 1977, two years prior to the release of *Rust Never Sleeps*. The punk movement had been going on for a few years and among the most prominent punks were Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols. Williamson says in his book that Young had identified strongly with the punk movement, praising its energy and rejection of pomposity. He “saw in it a reinvention of the original rebel spirit of rock’n’roll.”²⁸ This gives strength to the idea that Young is criticising the direction the music industry, and especially the direction rock music was taking at the time. Just as Presley broke conventions when he first emerged on the country music scene, propelling to an international star with his rock’n’roll music, Johnny Rotten symbolizes the reinvention of rock and roll into punk rock. This echoes the theme of the album that Young is presenting the ideas that rust never sleeps. The last stanza of the song is partly a repetition of the first stanza but with slight differences:

Hey hey, my my
Rock and roll can never die
There’s more to the picture
Than meets the eye

Here Young claims that “Rock and roll can never die” firmly establishing the theme of the album and death as its imagery. The last two lines also invite the listener to take a closer look at the remaining songs on the album, suggesting that they may convey a hidden meaning. The fact that this song is also the last song on the album frames the album and gives it a certain structure.

The second song on the album, as the first song, has music as its subject but focuses also strongly on the artists themselves and their role as creators of music. The title of the song, “Thrasher”, is in its own right a strong metaphor. The thrasher, a harvesting machine, is a direct reference to the scythe of death, although in Young’s interpretation it is not death in the worldly sense of the word but more as the artistic death or death of originality. By using the thrasher as a metaphor, a large machine used in industrial farming, Young voices the ideas of Adorno on standardization, setting the music industry as a focus. The first stanza of the song indicates what is coming:

They were hiding behind hay bales,
they were planting in the full moon

²⁸ *Journey through the past*, p. 76.

They had given all they had for something new
But the light of day was on them,
 they could see the thrashers coming
And the water shone like diamonds in the dew

“They” in the first line refers to the artist Young feels have given up on originality and have become victims of the music industry by giving way their artistic freedom: “They had given all they had for something new.” Williamson argues that Young was here taking “a fairly vicious sideswipe at his old colleagues,” referring to Young’s departure from the band Crosby, Still, Nash and Young (CSNY).²⁹ Nevertheless it is a swipe at the rock movement in general at the time. Simon Frith writes in his essay “Video Pop: Picking Up the Pieces” that at the time the music industry was coming out of its peak in rock music production “and a decade of spectacular growth-the value of worldwide record sales rose from \$4.75 billion to 7 billion between 1973 and 1978.”³⁰

The hay bales, in the first line of the poem, represent the produced products, manufactured to a certain size and standard, referring to the music’s industries tendencies to limit artistic freedom in order to cater to the market. This echoes Adorno’s ideas on the standardization of popular music. The line “they could see the thrashers coming” is also the reference to the title, for the thrashers are as inevitable as rust, representing the drive towards extinction. In the next stanza Young distances himself, or the narrator, from the thrashers, from the stagnation. “And I was just getting up, hit the road before it’s light / Tryin’ to catch an hour on the sun.” He goes on declaring that his day had just begun, implying that the others, “they” will not see the day, their end has come. In the third stanza this interpretation is even more strongly supported and in it Young brings up the freedom of nature, the eagle against the stagnation of the city, the industrialization of music:

Where the eagle glides ascending there’s an
 ancient river bending
Down the timeless gorge of changing
 where sleeplessness awaits
I searched out my companions, they were lost
 in crystal canyons
When the aimless blade of science slashed
 the pearly gates

²⁹ *Journey through the past*, p. 78.

³⁰ Simon Frith, “Video Pop: Picking Up The Pieces,” *Facing the Music: Essays on Pop, Rock and Culture*, ed. Simon Frith (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1990), p. 92.

It was then I knew I'd had enough, burned my
credit card for fuel
Headed out to where the pavement turns to sand
With a one-way ticket to the land of truth
and my suitcase in my hand
How I lost my friends I still don't understand

The eagle gliding ascending is at a stark contrast to the vultures descending later in the song: "Where the vulture glides descending." The eagle is also a classic metaphor for America as well as ideas of freedom, whereas the river is a classic reference to life and death. The narrator brings the song from the imminent "death" in the first stanza to the ideas of freedom in the second stanza, using the eagle as imagery for freedom. In the first four lines the river bends down a timeless gorge of changing in which sleeplessness awaits, echoing the title of the album and its theme of imminent stagnation. The sleeplessness is a direct reference to the title, connecting it directly with it.

The narrator's "companions" are a reference to Young's fellow musicians, but as stated earlier it can also be seen as a direct reference to his former band mates in CSNY. In the song Young uses a lot of imagery from nature and a recurring one are both canyons and gorges. The "crystal canyons" is a metaphor for the city, and is a reference to city sky scrapers, which also are a recurring image on the album. Sky scrapers evoke ideas of luxury and man's defeat against nature. This can be seen as a direct reference to the music industry. In the next line the narrator speaks of "the aimless blade of science" slashing "the pearly gates." Young again evokes the image of death, the blade as the scythe, and here it is the science of the music business that gives the blow of death against "the pearly gates," a classic biblical reference to heaven, and in Young's lyrics the metaphor for artistic freedom.

In the next lines the narrator rejects the industry by burning his credit card, the symbol for money and seeks freedom. In American culture the road and travel is a classical metaphor for freedom. The line "With a one-way ticket to the land of truth" enforces the ideas that it takes a certain sacrifice to get artistic freedom but only there you'll find truth. Young is here heading "into the black," seeking his roots, in which truth lies. The last line of the third stanza shows the narrator expressing a certain loss and regrets that his "companions" did not follow. The fourth stanza of the song goes like this:

They had the best selection, they were

poisoned with protection
There was nothing that they needed, they had
nothing left to find
They were lost in rock formations or became
park bench mutations
On the sidewalks and in the stations
they were waiting, waiting
So I got bored and left them there, they were
just deadweight to me
It's better on the road without that load
Brought back the time when I was eight or nine
I was watchin' my mama's T.V., it was that great
Grand Canyon rescue episode
Where the vultures glides descending on
an asphalt highway bending
Thru libraries and museums, galaxies and stars
Down the windy halls of friendship to the rose
clipped by the bullwhip
The motel of lost companions waits with
heated pool and air-conditioned bar

In the fourth stanza the narrator speaks about his companions. Young uses this stanza to criticize the element of luxury, the lifestyle of rock and roll. He portrays it as a poison taking away their originality, their freedom. The luxury made them feel fulfilled and therefore stagnant with nothing left to find. Young portrays them as “rock formations”, standing cast in stone with nothing to do but slowly become victims of corrosion. “Rock formation” is also a play with the word rock, as it can both be seen as stones, but also rock music. These lines follow a description of these “companions” as stagnant, unoriginal “bench mutations,” or something unpleasant and not what it was supposed to be. The narrator gets bored and leaves them, for to him these rocks are deadweight. The road re-emerges as a symbol of freedom. The narrator then evokes a childhood memory, and speaks of the Grand Canyon, with canyons as a recurring image. It both represents an American symbol as well as the greatness of nature. The vultures are a contrast to the eagle mentioned earlier in the song, evoking Young's ideas of the music industry as something negative. The “asphalt highway bending” contrasts the river earlier on, but does not come as a positive element or a symbol of freedom but more as the representative of the city, with its road kills scavenged by the vultures. The last stanza of the song goes like this:

But me I'm not stopping there, got my own
row left to hoe

Just another line in the field of time
When the thrashers come and I'm stuck in the sun
like dinosaurs in shrines
Then I'll know the time has come to give what's mine

Young brings again up the image of a garden, or of agriculture, by referring to this row left to hoe. It brings us back to the thrashers. The narrator needs to clean his row of weeds so that when the thrashers come he can enjoy the sun. It symbolizes Young's ideas of music, of originality. The third line refers to life, and with the thrasher imminent. The words "dinosaurs in shrines" is another reference to his fellow musicians, whose place he will take when it is his time. Dinosaurs evoke the feeling of extinction and support the theme of the album.

The third song on the album is "Ride My Llama." At first it seems to be a very bizarre song about a Martian and space travel but there is more to the picture than meets the eye. The first stanza of the song goes like this:

Remember the Alamo when help was on the way
It's better here and now, I feel that good today
I'd like to take a walk but not around the block
I really got some news
I met a man from Mars
He picked up all my guitars
And played me travelling songs
And when we got on ship
He brought me something for the trip
And said, "It's old but it's good"
Like any other primitive would
Ah, ah, ah, ah

The song begins with a reference to the Alamo, where one of the most famous battles in American history took place. The Alamo is in Texas and was held by the Americans when attacked by Mexicans in February and March 1836. The Mexicans won the battle for the Americans were severely outnumbered and re-enforcement didn't come.³¹ Although the beginning doesn't suggest it, the song echoes the same theme as the two previous songs on the album. The narrator expresses a want to "take a walk", echoing the same ideas of travel as in the earlier songs. This is supported even further in lines six and seven, where the Martian picks up the narrator's guitars and plays him travelling songs. As earlier argued, Young uses travel as a metaphor for artistic freedom and

³¹ "Battle of the Alamo", *Wikipedia: The free encyclopaedia* [3rd March 2004]. Available on Internet at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Alamo (Last revised 20/9/08).

artistic experiments. Using Mars and the Martian evokes a feeling of oddness and introduces a certain degree of de-familiarization. The narrator also expresses that he does not want to “walk around the block,” he wants a new experience supporting the interpretation. The ship, a space ship, also adds to the imagery and evokes a sense of the unknown. The narrator quotes the Martian saying “it’s old but it’s good,” which Williamson interprets as a reference to “smoking dope.”³² I, on the other hand, see it as Young’s reference to his roots in folk music. The next stanza of the song is the chorus of the song and goes like this:

I’m gonna ride my Llama from Peru to Texarkana
I wanna ride him thru my old neighbourhood
I’m gonna ride him thru my old neighbourhood
I’m gonna ride him thru my old neighbourhood

The focus of the chorus is the narrator’s llama ride. Again this supports the image of travel as metaphor for artistic freedom and by using a llama, an unusual choice of travel method, he is supporting the idea that originality is important. The narrator also expresses his wish to “ride thru [his] old neighbourhood”, underlining the point that Young is referring to his roots. The last part of the song is a repetition of the last part of the first stanza, putting the emphasis on the line “it’s old but its good.”

The next song on the album is the fourth song and is called “Pocahontas.” Its focus is not so much on the music industry as it is on American culture; a recurring theme in Young’s songs. Williamson writes about Pocahontas:

The Indian princess Pocahontas was the daughter of Powhattan, a sixteenth-century Indian chief. She became legend after Captain John Smith, one of the early Virginia colonists, was taken prisoner by local Indians in 1607. Powhattan was about to kill him but the captain was saved by the intervention of the 12-year-old Pocahontas. Five years later, she was captured by the colonists and held hostage in Jamestown when one of the settlers, John Rolfe, fell in love with her. She became a Christian, changed her name to Rebecca and married Rolfe. Pocahontas travelled to England in 1616 and was received at the court of James I, but died a year later. She became a national American symbol when Hart Crane gave her central role in his 1930 poem, *The Bridge*, which Young had read during his visit to London in 1971 and already turned into a song of the same name.³³

³² *Journey through the past*, p. 78.

³³ Same source, p. 78.

The song is a narrative song, telling of the killing of Indians. As on other songs on the album the imagery of death is present. Young contrast nature and Native Americans with modern culture, industrialization and the city. The first stanza sets the mood beginning with the imagery of nature:

Aurora borealis
The icy sky at night
Paddles cut the water
In a long and hurried flight
From the white man to the fields of green
And the homeland we've never seen

Aurora borealis, the northern lights, and the icy sky at night, paint the image of nature and beauty. This beauty is disturbed by the white man whom the Indians are fleeing. This evokes the ideas on flight, from the inevitable, as the theme of the album is. The imagery of nature in "The fields of green" and "the homeland we've never seen" refers to the afterlife, and as such suggests death. The next stanza supports this and goes like this:

They killed us in our tepee
And they cut our women down
the might have left some babies
Cryin' on the ground
But the firesticks and the wagons come
And the night falls on the settin' sun.

Just as in the many of the songs death is present and Young uses a violent image to enforce the feeling. The massacre in this song echoes the battle of the Alamo. The last line of the stanza is a metaphor for death with the night setting on the sun. In the third stanza the narrator brings the narration out of the past and into the present:

They massacred the buffalo
Kitty corner from the bank
The taxis run across my feet
And my eyes have turned to blanks
In my little box at the top of the stairs
With my Indian rug and a pipe to share

Here Young uses imagery that refers to modern times. The city becomes present and he uses the taxis and the apartment buildings, a recurring image. He uses de-familiarization

to make the narrator seem at odds with this environment and there is no nature to be seen. In the fourth stanza the narrator presents a wish:

I wish I was a trapper
I would give a thousand pelts
To sleep with Pocahontas
And find out how she felt
In the mornin' on the fields of green
In the homeland we've never seen

In this stanza we are presented with Pocahontas, a representative of Native Americans and an icon in American history. He presents a longing for this history, for a time lost. To emphasize this, the narrator speaks again of the afterlife, the never seen homeland. The last stanza brings into focus American popular culture icons, interconnecting the song to the present time:

And maybe Marlon Brando
Will be there by the fire
We'll sit and talk of Hollywood
And the good things there for hire
And the Astrodome and the first tepee
Marlon Brando, Pocahontas and me
Marlon Brando, Pocahontas and me
Pocahontas

Marlon Brando is a direct reference to American popular culture. He was, and still is an icon, and became famous for his part in the film *Rebel without a cause*. Young uses Brando for he is interconnected in so many ways with both American Popular culture but also because, as Williamson describes Brando, he was a noted campaigner for Native American's rights.³⁴

The image of them all sitting around the fire is a reference to the roots, to a certain time in history. It is in stark contrast with the modern times, with the image of the city, of Hollywood. Young also contrasts the Astrodome, a famous Houston sports stadium, with the tepee, which probably was the first kind of housing used by Native Americans.³⁵ In this stanza the narrator brings together Pocahontas, the representative

³⁴ *Journey through the past*, p. 79.

³⁵ "Reliant Astrodome", *Wikipedia: The free encyclopaedia* [11th September 2003]. Available on Internet at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astrodome> (Last revised 17/9/08).

of nature and Native Americans, and Marlon Brando, representative of the American popular culture, and the American dream.

The last song on the “folkie” side of the album is “Sail Away”, and as Williamson explains, it is called that because “Randy Newman had written a song called “Sail Away” about a slave trader, which had included the ironic but controversial line “climb aboard little wog.” Young’s song was part of a series he wrote as a tongue-in-cheek exercise in borrowing other songwriters’ titles and which he had played at a series of semi-private concerts which he had filmed in San Francisco for the *Human Highway* movie.”³⁶ It starts with a direct reference to the previous song on the album, “Pocahontas”:

I could live inside a tepee
I could die in Penthouse thirty-five
You could lose me on the freeway
But I would still make it back alive

Both the tepee and the penthouse are recurring images on *Rust Never Sleeps*. Here Young contrasts the tepee with the penthouse. Another repeated image is the freeway, as earlier stated a classic symbol of freedom. The narrator also declares that he will make it back alive, just as Young declares that he left his companions to the thrashers in an earlier song. Young is here declaring that he will not succumb to the death of originality. The first stanza is followed by a chorus:

As long as we can sail away
As long as we can sail away
There’ll be wind in the canyon
Moon on the rise
As long as we can sail away

In the chorus Young presents two repeated images, of sailing, ships, and of travel. The image of the canyon is also recurring as a symbol for nature. The moon is a reference to time, and as such the passing of it. The idea that rust never sleeps is evoked in these lines, but as long as the narrator can travel and explore, which means that as long as new things can be tried, originality is maintained. The next stanza of the song goes like this:

³⁶ *Journey through the past*, p. 79.

See the losers in the best bars
Meet the winners in the dives
Where the people are the real stars
All the rest of their lives

In this stanza the narrator talks about losers in the best bars, bringing to mind the line in “Thrasher” that goes: “They had the best selection, they were poisoned with protection.” Young is again criticizing the consumerism presented in the music industry. He then makes the narrator claim that the winners are in the dives, the more disrespected places, where the people are real stars. This echoes his ideas of originality and calls for keeping things real. This stanza is followed by a repetition of the chorus followed by the fifth stanza:

There’s a road stretched out between us
Like a ribbon on the high plain
Down from Phoenix through Salinas
‘Round the bend and back again

Again Young presents the image of the road as a symbol of freedom and to further its effect he shows it as a ribbon around a gift, suggesting something to long for. He then places the trip through the centre of America, from Phoenix through Salinas. The last stanza is a repetition of the chorus ending with the words “Sail away” repeated. As this is the end of side one of the album, the repetition of “sail away” comes as a mantra commanding originality. It represents the theme of travel as growth and reinvention.

Side two: urban living, punk and welfare mothers

Side two is accompanied by the band the Crazy Horse. The sound is rock but starts with a slow song. It echoes the themes of the album as a whole. This side begins with “Powderfinger”. The song is about this 22 year old boy who loses his life in a battle. It is a narrative song and the first stanza goes like this:

Look out, Mama, there’s a white boat comin’ up the river
With a big red beacon and a flag and a man on the rail
I think you better call John ‘cause it don’t
look like they’re here to deliver the mail

And it's less than a mile away
I hope they didn't come to stay
It's got numbers on the side and a gun
And it's makin big waves

Just as in the other songs on the album, death is coming towards the storyteller of the poem. Another recurring image is that of a boat and of the river. The second stanza says that "Daddy's gone and my brothers out hunting in the mountains." It also has names such as Emmy Lou and Big John, evoking a reference to American country culture. The theme of the inescapable is present in the last lines of stanza two: "And I just turned twenty-two / I was wonderin' what to do / And the closer they got / The more those feelin's grew." In the third stanza the narrator goes against the advice of his father and does not flee:

Daddy's rifle in my hand felt reassurin'
He told me, "Red means run, son
and numbers add up to nothin'"
When the first shot hit the dock I saw it comin'
Raised my rifle to my eye
Never stopped to wonder why
Then I saw black and my face splashed in the sky

The narrator meets death, the recurring image of the album. The next stanza goes like this:

Shelter me from the powder and the finger
Cover me with the thought that pulled the trigger
Just think of me as one you never figured
Would fade away so young
With so much left undone
Remember me to my love, I know I'll miss her

In this stanza the narrator is shown fading away too young, evoking the theme of the album as a whole.

The next song on the album is the ironic "Welfare Mothers." It starts with a heavy guitar rock sound. The words "Welfare mothers make better lovers" are repeated throughout the song, giving it a punk rock spirit. The first stanza of the song goes like this:

People, pick up on what I'm puttin' down now

Welfare mothers make better lovers
Down at every Laundromat in town now
Welfare mothers make better lovers
While they're washin' you can hear this sound now
Welfare mothers make better lovers
DEE VORR CEE!

In this song there is a total absence of nature but instead Young presents the alienation of the urban life of the lesser privileged. On this side of the album social realism is more prominent. The Laundromat evokes a feeling of the urban life of the underprivileged, firmly establishing the ideas of alienation. The second stanza of the song goes like this:

Hard to believe that love is free now
Welfare mothers make better lovers
Out on the street with the whole family now
Welfare mothers make better lovers
Hard to believe that love is free now
Welfare mothers make better lovers
DEE VORR CEE!

In this stanza the idea of urban life is supported. There is also a reference to the ideology of the hippie movement, as Young takes a swipe at them with the line "hard to believe that love is free now." The last stanza of the song is the first stanza repeated. The song is short and has some similarities with the punk songs of the same era, with both repeated lyrics and a fast beat.

The third song on side two is "Sedan Delivery." The song begins with an up-tempo drum beat. The first stanza of the song goes like this:

Last night I was cool at the pool hall
Held the table for eleven games
Nothing was easier than the first seven
I beat a woman with varicose veins
She stopped to see herself in the mirror
Fix her hair and hide her veins
But she lost the game

This is a narrative song and it repeats Young's ideas of urban life and alienation. In this stanza the narrator tells of a night at a pool hall. By describing the woman using horrid images he evokes the unpleasantness of urban life. He explores this further in the next stanza:

Next day I went to the dentist
He pulled some teeth and I lost some blood
We'd like to thank you for the cards you sent us
My wives and I were all choked up

The image of the rotten teeth and blood support the ideas of urban life as stagnant. In the last two lines Young presents a very mundane and even boring image of the regular life of the narrator. In the third stanza of the song the narration shifts:

I recall how Caesar and Cleo
Made love in the Milky Way
They needed boats and armies go get there
I know there's a better way

Caesar and Cleo is a historical reference but also a reference to a famous movie, featuring American actors, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. The stanza also features a reference to the recurring images of boats. In the next stanza the narrator speaks of the movie and the book:

I saw the movie and read the book
But when it happened to me
I sure was glad I had what it took
To get away

In this stanza Young presents one of the themes of the album which is escaping the urban life, escaping un-originality. This is supported by the chorus which follows and is a repetition of the words "gotta get away" four times followed by the sixth stanza of the song:

I'm makin' another delivery
Of chemicals and sacred roots
I'll hold what you have to give me
But I'll use what I have to use
The lasers are in the lab
The old man is dressed in white clothes
Everybody says he's mad
No one knows the things that he knows

As the song evolves the meaning slowly dissolves and the feeling of alienation becomes stronger. This is furthered in the following chorus which is a repetition of the words “no one knows” four times over. The same feelings are evoked in the eighth stanza:

I'm lookin' in every hallway
I still can't accept the stares
I' sleepin' with many covers
I'm warm now so I don't care
I'm thinkin' of no one in my mind
Sedan delivery is a job I know I'll keep
It sure was hard to find

The narrator is trying to grasp something but doesn't achieve it just as the song fades out to the repetition of the words “hard to find.”

The last song on side two, and on the album as well, is “Hey hey, my my (into the black)”. It is almost a complete repetition of the first song on the album, “Hey hey, my my (out of the blue). There are slight differences in the lyrics as well as in the performance. This version is, as the other songs on side two, played with electric guitars and with a strong drum beat. This repetition of the song at the beginning and the end of the album frames it within and sets the theme of the album on a discourse on music and artistic freedom. The first two stanzas are identical to the first stanzas in the first song. The third stanza is nearly identical but is slightly different:

The king is gone but he's not forgotten
Is this the story of Johnny Rotten?
It's better to burn out 'cause rust never sleeps
The king is gone but he's not forgotten

The line that is different from the line in the first song is that instead of “It's better to burn out, than to fade away,” the line “cause rust never sleeps” is placed at the end of the sentence. This is a reference to the title of the album and the main theme. The last stanza of the song is identical:

Hey hey, my my
Rock and roll can never die
There's more to the picture
Than meets the eye

Conclusion

In this essay it has been established that, however one looks at it, music is hard to write about. Not only does music convey meaning through elements occurring simultaneously on many interdependent levels; it also often creates its effects without any apparent interpretation on the receiver's behalf. Furthermore it has been determined that, when popular music is analysed using the concepts and approaches of musicology, some of these elements are overlooked, making the interpretation limited.

As I have shown, establishing these arguments is important in making an effective analysis of the imagery on *Rust Never Sleeps*. Although the focus of the essay has mostly been on the lyrical element, both the placement of the two sides of the album within specific genres and the use of a certain "sound," was taken into account when the meaning of the album was interpreted.

By using two distinctive genres on his album, folk music and rock music, Young firmly draws into focus music as the subject matter of his album. By taking into account both the sound and the beat of the songs my analysis and interpretation has shown that these elements support this argument. On their own, these elements do not prove a great deal, but taken together, however, with the imagery of the album, this position is confirmed.

I want to elaborate this by underlining the interpreted meaning of the album title. The foregoing evidence I have presented supports the interpretation that the title portrays one of the main themes of the album, that originality is transitory. The imagery in the title echoes Young's criticism of the music industry and presents us with the image of death, which is then repeated throughout the album, in further support of the argument. In the title we are also presented with notions of modernism and nature which in turn ricochets throughout the album's imagery as binary positions. The nature represents the originality, the object to be desired. It is contrasted with the city, representing the loss of artistic freedom.

Further to this theme, Young uses the imagery of the road and of travel in the lyrics to challenge the listener, other musicians, or himself to leave the comfort of home, of un-originality and to seek freedom from the alienation of urban living and in order to find originality. This is also supported by images that refer to Native Americans and becomes personified in Pocahontas. Just as the subject matter of the album is personified in the reference, in the first song on the album, to Elvis Presley and Johnny

Rotten, with Presley representing the beginning of rock'n'roll and Rotten representing the criticism on contemporary rock music.

In conclusion I hope that my analysis has shown that there is more to the picture than meets the eye.

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