



Ou est la Rock?



H z S G d

"Fighting to stay free"

169...November-December 2012

And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...the thing I like most about *H z So Good* is that I don't have to fact-check. By that I mean it's mostly opinion based on fact. At least as far as I know. ☺

It is, as *Cheers'* Cliff Clavin would say, a well-known fact, that top 40 radio's success was built on rock 'n roll, but not necessarily rock 'n roll bands. Yes, the song credited with lighting the fuse for what we used to call the "Rock Era" was by a band, Bill Haley and his Comets. They really were a band, too, not just musicians backing up a star lead singer (like, say, the Jordanaires or the Crickets). Most of top 40's earliest rock stars, however, were soloists with one instrument (Chuck Berry and his guitar, Fats or Little Richard or Jerry Lee on the piano) or duos (the Everlys and their guitars).

The bands didn't really kick in until a few years later, and most were instrumental acts (The Champs, Johnny and the Hurricanes, The Ventures). Far as I can tell, it was the Beach Boys that put the vocal rock 'n roll group on the map to stay. The Beach Boys hit during an era of overproduced pop music by mostly solo acts or vocal groups. Vocal surf bands didn't reverse the trend, but it did help pave the way for all the bands from England that hit our shores in 1964, and that led to rock's big band boom, if you will.

From 1964 to around 1979, the rock band dominated top 40. That's just 15 years of the format's nearly 60-year history, or the Rolling Stones' peak years. After that point, dance-pop music took over, or more accurately, reclaimed the throne, thanks first to disco and later to dance-able or mostly R&B-influenced pop. Then came hip-hop and here we are.

The door never slammed on rock 'n roll bands – there have been brief resurgences, such as when the 'hair bands' struck in the late 1980s and the grungies in the 90s – but for the most part, they've been on a steady decline since 1980. That's a decline that left top 40 with just a handful of regular hit-making bands as of ten years ago – Nickelback, Maroon 5, Daughtry, Coldplay – and with, arguably, just one or two now. And that's only if you accept a band like Maroon or Train as 'rock' even if it has no presence on what's called 'rock radio.' Make that a requirement, and then there are, arguably, none.

It's not that the rock band is dead or dying, rather that it's been changing for years and contemporary radio has been late to catch up. Both groups pictured above, Mumford & Sons (left) and The Lumineers, have been referred to by writers as "folk groups" although both are hitmakers, selling albums and tracks and on rock radio playlists. The trio fun., one

of 2012's big success stories, is called an "indie pop band" even though there are guitars and drums. So the whole thing gets confusing, except for the fact that the traditional four-or-more-piece 'swagger band,' with a definable rock sound, is becoming a thing of the past the way doo wop, hippie pop and disco all have. It just stings a little more because it's rock, and none of us who remember these groups before they were "classic rock" want to see them go the way of the Twinkie.

It's also been true for awhile that the guitar is no longer the centerpiece of most pop hits (even though it's been making a bit of a comeback lately, albeit still part of a mostly-digital production). If you make a Power Point about music for kids, you can't make the guitar the one graphic that defines music; that's a very clear "man, are you old" move.

Of course, the beauty of popular music is that everything I've just written could be completely contradicted next year or the year after. For all we know, rock in its purest form could return if one artist says so and everyone follows. I'm not saying Justin Bieber will suddenly grab a guitar and form a band, but stranger things have occurred. The fact is, there was an era where most of the catchiest hit songs came from actual rock 'n roll bands as opposed to soloist and studio musicians. And, for all we know, in a world where anyone can create a hit online, it could happen again.

And the hits...

SUNDAY WILL NEVER BE THE SAME Years ago in *Hz*, I did a piece about the comics, as in the ones in the newspaper. It was so long ago that there wasn't a thought given to newspapers going away. But even then, it was noticeable that the funnies were being downgraded from what they once were, which was the star of the Sunday paper. As late as the early 90s, the Sunday comics section was still the first thing you'd see when you looked down to where the papers were stacked: everything else was wrapped in them. Now, not only is the comics section not the first thing you see, you're lucky if you can find it at all: these days it's used to wrap the circulars in and usually is reduced to four full-sized pages from what was once ten or even twelve, or to one section from what was of-ten two. The number of strips per page has gone way up, as their size has been shrunk to something you need special glasses to read if you're my age. Unless you're the brilliantly drawn *Prince Valiant*, gone are the days of one strip taking up half a page. Not to mention the quality of the paper used is clearly thinner, makes the colors run and makes the entire section look like crap.



The way it was.

There's one other thing. Perhaps as a result of this steady downgrade, plus the issue of which strips papers decide to run, the quality of comics themselves isn't what it was. First off: not one (*Peanuts*) but two (*For Better Or For Worse*) best-of strips taking the space that could be given to something new? Come on. Second: the increase in number of 'real time' strips (*Gasoline Alley*, *Funky Winkerbean*, *Jump Start*) heavy on the sentimentality and light on laughs. Third: the decline of widely-run topical strips (*Doonesbury* and ?). Fourth: Not enough fourth-wall breaking (aside from *Pearls Before Swine*, where author Stephan Pastis is an occasional character, not sure anyone else does this anymore). Fifth: not enough strip turnover, compared to earlier eras when new comics had to be great or die (are you telling me there's really not a better, newer, more-funny-in-2012 strip out there than *Arlo & Janis*? For that matter, most of the strips running in papers today were in those same papers 30 years ago.). Sixth: the decline of soap or adventure strips (if *Mary Worth's* outdated, why haven't any younger writers tried something more contemporary, and why in this age of superheroes does Spider-Man et al not live to fight another day in the comics?). And if you'll count it as seventh: the decline of youth-targeted advertising, which was often the best thing about the funnies. I guess when you're using it to wrap all the other advertising, it's not itself as effective an advertising medium, unless you count the much-ignored (by me anyway) back page.

Yes, I know you can read all the comics online, and that's probably what lots of fans do. But...well...it's just not the same.

COMICS RELIEF? Maybe I can't read 'em like LaGuardia or make 'em laugh like Schultz, but I like to think I'm doing something on air worthy of your Sunday listening. The Sunday edition of "The Rest Of The Week With Rich Appel" usually includes a top 20 countdown, the "Fab 4 At Noon," the "Cowboy Curveball," 1-Hit Wonders At 1, Sunday Filet O' Soul and UK chart flashback, not to mention birthday and on-this-date songs (and

Sunday before last, as it happened, a mini-tribute to the Sunday comics). 10am-3pm ET at <http://wrnradio.com/streaming/>. Also, may I plug...

* "The CHRonicler" in Thursday's *Billboard Top 40 Update* (subscribe free at <http://www.billboard.biz/newsletters>)

* Saturday's edition of "The Rest Of The Week" 6am-1pm ET, also at <http://wrnradio.com/streaming/> (sample at <http://wrnradio.com/2012/03/watch-rich-appels-video-aircheck-video/>).

* Follow me at <http://twitter.com/#!/@Restoftheweek>

* Friend me on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/richappel7>).

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Past editions of Hz So Good can be seen at <http://www.60s70s.org/HzSoGood>