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'Until I realised that rock music was my connection to the rest of the human race, I felt like I was dying, for some reason, and I didn't know why.'

Bruce Springsteen

THE ROCK CONNECTION

Rock is built entirely on bluster, myth and a revisionist approach to its own past which Stalin himself might regard as a bit heavy-handed. This means that anyone hoping to bluff their way through this strange and unpredictable world will have to slide everything up a gear. If they are especially daring, they can add to the great mound of bluffs the entire genre perches on, like putting a bean tin on the summit of Everest. Bruce Springsteen had this to say about the music business: 'Until I realised that rock music was my connection to the rest of the human race, I felt like I was dying, for some reason, and I didn't know why.'

The very essence of rock clings to a precise superficiality, presenting plastic statements and gestures as coming from a more honest, real and authentic place – seeing itself as the only place where such inauthentic authenticity can survive and flourish. This is the sort of dubious double-speak which thrives in this labyrinthine and synthetic world.

Rock fans are able to hold two utterly contradictory

views in their minds – that their music is simultaneously ‘real’ and equally ‘unreal’. But to the outside world and to interlopers, they talk of albums and musicians in the hushed and reverential tones normally associated with great paintings and £5,000 bottles of Chateau Lafite Rothschild.

This book will give you all the ammunition you need to walk into that down-at-heel venue or back-street record shop where rock fans congregate and hold your own. It will conduct you safely through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about rock, and equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer – it might even allow you to be accepted as a rock aficionado of rare knowledge and experience. But it will do more; it will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your wisdom and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you probably didn't know the difference between something called Limp Bizkit and a late-night bonding ritual in the public schools of England (involving biscuits).

So throw away those comfort-waist jeans and cushion-soled casuals and, while you're at it, toss that TV-advertised compilation album you got for Christmas into the recycling bin. We're going into the booming, beating, bogus heart of rock in all its many guises.

ROCK OF AGES

Rock is a mongrel genre with bits of assorted musical styles in its DNA. But like budget rhinoplasty, you can see the scars if you know where to look. Those who live and breathe rock like to present it as somehow being elemental, suggesting that it sprung forth from the earth fully formed. In reality, as much magpie as cuckoo, rock took what it wanted, evicted what it didn't want and dressed itself in the fineries of whatever it stole – as shall be seen.

BLUES, COUNTRY AND GOSPEL

Rock is obsessed with the past (things were more ‘real’ then) so always ensure that you talk about ‘rock music's roots’ as the first real musical melting pot in the 1950s – a meshing of black genres (rhythm and blues and gospel) with white ones (country and western).

While Elvis is the accepted ‘King’, bluffers should casually drop in the fact that Bill Haley pre-dates him and that the first rock ‘n’ roll single was ‘Rocket 88’ by

Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats (which was really a pseudonym for Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm).

The term 'rock 'n' roll' was a euphemism for, ahem, sexual congress and it is commonly accepted that it was popularised by 1950s American DJ Alan Freed who brought black music to white audiences at a time of segregation in the USA. His career was one marked by scandal; he was charged with inciting a riot in 1958 at a show in Boston and the next year was sacked by WABC-AM after the payola scandal (accepting bribes to promote certain records) engulfed the radio business. From this moment, rock 'n' roll really gained its outlaw status, breaking rules and refusing to behave with decorum.

ROBERT JOHNSON SELLS HIS SOUL

While Elvis was famously only filmed from the waist up initially on American TV (lest his wiggling legs and thrusting pelvis compromise the nation's morality), this, as all bluffers should know, was a mere bagatelle compared to blues legend Robert Johnson. The story goes that he was a very average blues guitarist and singer in the mid-1930s but took off like a rocket when, at a crossroads somewhere in Mississippi at midnight, he met the devil and had him tune his guitar and make him a master musician in a Faustian exchange for his soul.

Johnson, who died at 27 (*see* 'The 27 Club', page 101), left behind just a handful of recordings (and only a few photos of him exist), making him perhaps the

most mythical and elusive figure in rock history. The fact that the devil/crossroads story is a load of hooey has not got in the way of the myth, and bluffers must solemnly nod and accept this as truth, thereby imbuing rock with a sense of satanic danger and netherworldly intrigue. He died, according to reports, after drinking a poisoned bottle of whisky handed to him by the irate husband of a woman he was propositioning for sex.

Thus the building blocks of rock were put in place – sex, the dark side, alcohol, immorality and lascivious behaviour. Johnson should consider himself lucky that Rasputin has not been dubbed the Godfather of Rock instead of him.

ELECTRIC GUITARS AND AMPLIFIERS

The devil, based on the Robert Johnson myth, has all the best tunes – but before rock music, they weren't very loud. Two technological advances combined to result in the parental cry that all bluffers must agree marked their childhood and adolescence – 'Turn that bloody racket down!'

The electric guitar dates back to the 1930s but came into its own in the 1950s. Two names, however, made it synonymous with rock – Les Paul, who is credited with creating the solid body electric guitar, and Gibson, whose mass-produced instruments pushed prices down and made them widely available. You might feel compelled to genuflect when either name is mentioned, eyes misting over as you rhapsodise about the 'action' of vintage Les Paul and Gibson guitars. The other guitar