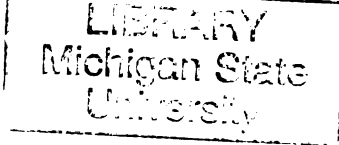




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ROCK AND REVOLUTION: THE MC5 AND MUSIC'S POLITICAL LIFE

By

Mathew J. Bartkowiak

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

### ROCK AND REVOLUTION: THE MC5 AND MUSIC'S POLITICAL LIFE

By

Mathew J. Bartkowiak

Released in 1969, the MC5's *Kick Out the Jams* was a new measure of the relationship between music and cultural and political change. Although rock's entire history has been based in an inherent sense of rebellion, the MC5 as the "house band" and central organizing force for the White Panther Party (WPP), a group which advocated for the end to capitalism, the full support of the Black Panther Party's initiatives and other revolutionary aims (and which would become the target of local state and federal authorities), formalized for various perspectives the threat, the promise or the parody that music could hold within larger societal spheres. A space of useable rebellion was created that could offer audiences a safe space from which to question dominant power structures, as well as providing a text from which countercultural America and the role of music in its life could be measured by numerous interested parties.

The following study is not to determine or search for a unified goal in respect to the careers of the White Panther Party and the MC5. Instead, the complexity of interactions and perspectives will be used to determine the parameters of an experiment of power. This experiment and the desired goal of this book is to understand, through the career of this band as a case study, the potentialities and contradictions that occur in the relationship of music and social change. The MC5 is an example of the inherent possibilities of audiences, performers, producers and others to engage in a space of useable rebellion.

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To Sara and Ella

&

To Mom & Dad...thanks for teaching me about the importance of music. We miss you  
Dad.

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My immense gratitude to all of those who helped make this dissertation a reality. To my incredible wife, Sara and daughter, Ella for their patience and love, thank you. I would like to acknowledge as well my wonderful family: Mom, Dad, Jus, Mark, Sandy and Aaron for their support. The work contained within I hope is an adequate reflection of the brilliant scholars I have worked with over the years; Gary Hoppenstand, Ann Larabee, David Stowe, Maria Bruno, Jack Santino, Joe Ruff, Joe Austin, Craig Lockard, Andrew Austin and Peter Kellogg. I have been so fortunate to surround myself with such caring and gifted scholars; thank you all so much. I would also like to thank those who I have so completely exploited through their efforts in editing and discussion about this topic, Kathryn Edney, Jerry Goldberg, Arthur Versluis, & Don Garso. Thanks as well to Matt Conger for introducing me to the MC5's music. My humble thanks as well to the DKT/MC5 family who have been so incredibly open and kind during these interviews: Michael, Angela Davis & Family, Wayne Kramer and Margaret Saadi-Kramer, Dennis Thompson and Patrice, John Sinclair, Leni Sinclair, Pun Plamondon...I hope I have done justice to this band and its life.

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## **Introduction**

### **Rock and Revolution: The MC5 and Music's Political Life**

Released in 1969, the MC5's *Kick Out the Jams* was a new measure of the relationship between music and cultural and political change. Although rock's entire history has been based in an inherent sense of rebellion, the MC5 as the "house band" for the White Panther Party, a group which advocated for the end to capitalism, the full support of the Black Panther Party's initiatives and other revolutionary aims (and which would become the target of local state and federal authorities), formalized for various perspectives the threat, the promise or the parody that music could promise within larger societal spheres. The complexities of a product like the MC5's career and its revolutionary potential are hard to fully collect and ascertain.

Scholars within popular music history and cultural studies have struggled to determine these parameters and their practice in everyday life. These debates concerning the validity of popular texts range from pessimistic paranoia in the Frankfurt School to positivistic self-assertion through popular culture considered in Birmingham School thinkers, with numerous other polarities to boot. Often though, theoretical concerns of power and control often abstract very real human practices. This gap in consideration in determining cultural texts needs to be filled in by talking to the actors themselves along with considering theoretical frameworks to guide the realities of a musical creation like the MC5. Research trips to Los Angeles and Detroit in 2005 and 2006 to talk with those involved revealed an experiment in rock, an experiment in determining the power of media and spectacle, and an experiment in determining the role of music in cultural and

political change.

My interviews with band members Michael Davis, Wayne Kramer, Dennis “Machine Gun” Thompson (the other two members, Rob Tyner and Fred “Sonic” Smith passed away in the 1990s) their manager John Sinclair, and their photographer, Leni Sinclair opened up a world of multiple interpretations of what the music was supposed to mean. Was it a call to revolution? Was it about becoming a big rock and roll band? Was it parody? Was it serious? Was it meant to spark cultural or political revolution (or both)? The answer to all of these questions was an emphatic yes. The ability to frame an entity like the MC5 and the WPP, which sought to make the most of mass media is a difficult one, as individuals and the media itself all look to determine and communicate specific meanings to the targeted audience. For some, the group was a means to sparking a revolution of political and social consciousness through the use of the media and rock and roll. For others the group was meant to be a means to begin a career and make a living through the production of their musical works (and many perspectives existed in-between).

The following study is not to determine or search for a unified goal in respect to the careers of the White Panther Party and the MC5. Instead, the complexity of interactions and perspectives will be used to determine the parameters of an experiment of power. This experiment and the desired goal of this book is to understand, through the career of this band as a case study, the potentialities and contradictions that occur in the relationship of music and social change. The MC5 is an example of the inherent possibilities of audiences, performers, producers and others to engage in a space of

useable rebellion.

“Useable rebellion” refers to the inherent rebellious nature of rock that has both allowed producers and consumers to partake in a notion of questioning social mores and ideas in a safe spot that for the price of concert ticket or CD can be secured. It also is a space in which dominant power structures and major corporate interests can find immense profit from this successful blending of rebellion into the very fabric of rock and roll as a social and consumer practice. The MC5 is a subject from which this dichotomy of subversion and profit can be better understood. The MC5 tested where these borders begin and end. By mobilizing the powers of subversion built into rock and roll from its inception, the band and the WPP were able to test the potentialities of music within the realm of social change. They also create questions about the role of dominant corporate power in harnessing this same energy within rock and roll, as it has successfully done since the 1950s. Hence, this study does not seek to deny or accept the MC5 and the White Panther Party as a legitimate/illegitimate counter cultural power in the late 1960s and early 70s. The main focus will center on how the band was able to harness the potential power of the counterculture and rock and roll to create a media-friendly space in which rebellion could be explored and enacted for the artists, audiences and others in a framable model.

In order to enact such an interdisciplinary study, an interdisciplinary framework will be required. Not only do issues of the media, popular music and popular culture studies come into the fray, but also so do perspectives from history and political thought from the New Left and other radical forces. These conceptual frameworks will allow for



balance from which to gauge the products and perspectives from the MC5 and those involved in its creation and maintenance. This multiplicity of perspectives in framing this study will offer new critical insight into biographical sketches like David Carson's *Grit, Noise and Revolution* which views the MC5 as one of numerous players within a larger Detroit rock scene or *The Future is Now!: An Illustrated History of the MC5* which chronicles the life of the band from its inception to its demise. Both of these works provide a biographical layout of the group's career but do not focus on the relationship of music to cultural and social change nor do they offer extended insight into the ramifications of the band's association and disassociation from the White Panthers. Jeff Hale's article on the band, "Total Assault on Culture," which focuses on the band as a countercultural force pushed into radical extremism, overshoots the musical life of the group and focuses on an intense view of the band and the White Panthers as a formalized entity. Don McLeese's *The MC5's Kick Out the Jams*, the other major work on the band, also veers towards biographical, but also allows some perspective into the band as a musical entity, which were definitive influences on the punk and heavy metal community.

This book openly denies any wish to act as a comprehensive biographical work. Instead, the research will be an intensive case study in looking at the interaction of music and possibilities for cultural and political change. The very real pressures arising from the political and social climate of the time, the music industry and media's framing methods all contribute to complexity of the MC5 in myth and musical practice.

Numerous road trips to Detroit and many flights later, this study is the reflection a diverse

amount of research and insight that has been the result of actively questioning players in a production that undercuts any single intent or perspective. There is much more to the MC5 story than politics, dissent and consumable rebellion. Only a small part of the equation is being dealt with in this work, and is not intended to be a definitive treatise on a group that will continue to demand the attention of scholars, musicians and fans alike.

In order to begin the examination of the band specifically in the frame of useable rebellion, the first chapter will offer a short history of the investment by fans and by producers of an inherent sense of rebellion within the advent and life of rock and roll. Much as jazz had done earlier in the century, rock and roll offered a potentially subversive wealth of anti-authoritarianism, sexuality and thanks to rabid consumerism, the creation of clearly delineated generational gaps in the musical fabric of the United States. Audience use as much as marketing forces created a space for subversion in the nation's ears and minds. These influences were ones that the MC5 took on and grew up with in their lives in the Detroit area (a hotbed of popular performers including John Lee Hooker, Bill Haley and others). Attempts to institutionalize these musical forms by producers into more marketable and less threatening forms (i.e. Pat Boone) were eventually rejected as in the 60s. The link between rock and rebellion continued to develop.

It is an open question how much this meant in everyday life. Did the potential empowerment of music as rebellion contribute any significance to the debate over the massive social issues of the 1960s like race, class, Vietnam and agency? Indeed, music was seen as a common referent in social change movements in the 1960s. "We Shall

Overcome” or “Blowin’ in the Wind” for instance were common references that allowed people to unify their voices in the streets and on college campuses. The violent offspring of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Weathermen took their name specifically from a Bob Dylan song, “Subterranean Homesick Blues.”

Obviously music was invested in by a generation that pushed record sales to new levels and found a voice for these expressions especially in the rise of the New Left and counter cultural movements. Yet, how much change could this common culture effect? Was it meant to bring about change? Rebellion was alive in well in the music industry in these two decades, yet its effect was hard to comprehend. Regardless, market forces as well as audiences delighted in the process of subversion through music pushing acts like the Jefferson Airplane and Country Joe and Fish in front of audiences of hundreds of thousands both on record, and in massive concert festivals across the nation. Scholars who have written on the interaction of music and social forces such as Reebee Garafalo, Simon Frith and Keith Negus amongst others provide a conceptual framework from which to begin to understand this interaction of rebellion and rock. The rise of the MC5 and its affiliation of the White Panther Party were set to push this discussion of music’s place in cultural and political change to a more immediate level, as bands themselves potentially became their own organizing political forces.

The 1950s and 1960s, decades in which rock and roll formalized itself as a genre are inherently tied to the rise of mass media forms in a new era of consumerism after World War II. Understanding the power of this media force in the constitution and life of the genre (models that the MC5 and WPP would invest in) is a first step into this

discussion of meaning and power in rock and rebellion. Robert Benford, David Snow and Todd Gitlin can allow insight not only to the realities of media and its capabilities of labeling, marketing and naturalizing popular culture products in the post-war age. Conversely, Gitlin's work especially can contextualize the intersection of politics (of the New Left) and music, two entities whose success was based on the post war media onslaught and the spectacle of rebellion. Theories that deal with framing also point to the need of a holistic interpretation of one of popular culture's great false binaries, art versus commerce.

This intersection and the continued debate considering authenticity highlight the continued investment of individuals in music. Did rock really mean to subvert? Did it mean to sell? Conversations between now institutionalized names in music scholarship such as Reebee Garafalo and Simon Frith in works like *Rock and Roll is Here to Pay* and *Performing Rights*, respectively, point us in a direction which seeks to understand the relationship of media to creative and artistic expression, and how much these factors are determined from above or from below. Keith Negus in *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* links these discussions of authenticity and the realities of media power, providing the main theoretical framework from which to look into the history of rock, roll and rebellion. It no longer is a case of art versus commerce, but instead is a process. This process entails not only industry producing culture, but culture also producing an industry. Here the true nature of rock and its relationship to rebellion can best be understood.

Chapter 2, "Revolution on Your Headphones: Charting Social Location in the

Rise of the MC5 and the White Panther Party,” begins the complicated discussion of the varying perspectives of the group’s members amongst WPP officials and amongst themselves. These varying perspectives are reflected upon in terms of foundations for the band member’s political and musical mindsets. Chapter 3 looks to locate the social location of group members in an attempt to understand their goals for the life of the band and its role in the White Panthers. Members reflect on historical events, musical foundations and the realities of local, national and international concerns that shaped the band and to differing political and musical extents the plans and goals of group members in the MC5. There is not necessarily any grand narrative that is identified in these processes: instead an interaction of social and musical events and practices intertwine in the formation of the group’s musical and social/political views. These views are highlighted especially through the guide of meso-level works dealing with the social, political and cultural history of the metro Detroit area (including Sugrue’s *Origins of the Urban Crisis*), which directly influenced the creation of the band and the WPP not only in their direct experiences, but also shaped their ideas and approach to national and international issues that would form to varying extents, member’s commitments to political and social messages through the band.

Chapter 3, “Motor City Burning: Rock and Rebellion in the White Panther Party and the MC5,” begins a detailed examination of the White Panther Party and the MC5 as a musical and potentially social force. The chapter reflects the first phase of research conducted with involved individuals within the organization. John Sinclair, the band’s manager and head of the White Panther Party was interviewed in Detroit in the Spring of

2005 as was his former wife and band photographer Leni Sinclair in the hopes of accumulating a perspective on the group from the Sinclair's cases, some of the most potent forces behind the band's rise to fame and the development of the Party itself. Pun Plamondon, a co-founder of the White Panther Party was also consulted. The writings of Sinclair and semiotic messages put forth by the band and the collective point to numerous influences that can allow a gauge from which these ideas came forth.

John Sinclair, as one of the most sincere and sure proponents of the path the band and the Party were taking at the time, provides immense insight into the realities of the life of the organizations. Instead of a formalized political organization, Sinclair discusses the organic base from which the Party came into being and the way in which the WPP and the MC5 were working without a concrete plan of action and calculation. Music was seen as the real tool of enlightenment to Sinclair; the MC5 was the catalyst for change against imperialist control. The reaction to the group by local and national authorities was swift and severe for Sinclair who would serve several years in a federal penitentiary. In the end those in high positions in the WPP looked to the MC5 as a media spearhead for open questioning and rebellion against societal norms. Far beyond politics, the band was representative of a program put forth of "rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets" (Sinclair 1). Rebellion had found a comfortable home.

Chapter 4, "Sonic Anarchy: The Making of the MC5," focuses on this disagreement in political and musical visions of the surviving members of the group: individuals who are often forgotten when looking at the life of the WPP. Perspectives vary significantly as to what the revolution was to mean and what the outcome was to be

for those involved. Formalized conceptualizations of the group's political aims have proved a difficulty in determining an overarching frame for audiences, the WPP, and band members themselves due to these differing perspectives on intent. The White Panther Party and the MC5 as the determinate power within the organization was prone to levels of use by varying groups and populations. Audiences, the government, and others to varying extents bought into the space of useable rebellion by the group. Sometimes dismissed and sometimes feared as a threat to national security the potentialities of meanings took on lives of their own and continue to do so today, creating an almost mythical vision of group within the counterculture and within rock and roll history. Coming back to Chapter 1, this section will focus on, through Gitlin's work especially, the confounding nature of creation in the mediated age. Here the polysemic nature of intent versus appearance is greatly problematized.

Chapter 5, "Guns and Guitars: Revolutionary Style and Substance?," will examine the career of the band in determining their revolutionary potential as accessible products of useable rebellion. Interestingly, the band for all of its political ascriptions very rarely addressed social issues. This chapter will look to the other "revolutionary" potentialities of the band and its career. Critics and other musicians commonly cite the group as a powerful influence in the development of both punk and heavy metal (two more musical forms that continued the formalized tradition of spaces of useable rebellion). What, hence, then made their music and their message a revolutionary one for other artists and audiences? The MC5 understood the importance of performance. Numerous areas of "performance" including lyrics, onstage antics, and media propaganda were utilized to

present and sell an image and reputation of the band. These arenas of performance pushed forth representations of rawness and rebellion to a sometimes believing, sometimes suspect audience. Here the message would be conveyed, but like the Yippies, the call to revolution could only equal a call, with no response possible. Such factors, along with the media assault orchestrated by Trans-Love Energies and the White Panther Party created an entity that no one involved in the band or the WPP was ready or able to comprehend. Thrust into the national spotlight, both of popular culture and government surveillance, the myth of the MC5 quickly eclipsed any single actor conflating and confounding those who thought they were at the controls. To return to a reoccurring theme, framing models create a method from which to examine these possibilities of confusion and ultimately in terms of political change, a failure.

Chapter 6, “Up Against the Wall: Music’s Place in Revolution,” then takes the lessons of the MC5 case study and looks to larger applications of the interrogated interaction of music and politics. The case study does not aim to extend itself into universals concerning this interaction, but instead will look into the potentialities of music’s role in social and political change through the success and failures of the MC5 as a measure for the applicability and reality of mass mediated frames potentially constituting a tool for said change. Stanley Aronowitz’s *The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism*’s contention that there are two countercultures, the political and the cultural will occupy a central presence as the lessons of the MC5’s career points to an inherent disconnect in revolution in which cultural revolution does not equal lasting political change.



Unlike other acts of its time or since, never has the line between political and cultural life been so blurred as it was with the MC5. Sex, drugs and rock and roll became a call for revolution in the streets that was heard and feared by some, embraced by others. Numerous wiretaps, a federal prison or two, and thousands of albums sold later, the MC5 myth grows. It is time to look past the myth and instead look to the realities and perspectives of its participants and weigh these against critical thought and perspectives on the power of media, the power of music in social change and development.

Far from a top-down method of ideological control, the potentialities were actively negotiated amongst numerous interests benefiting from a sense of useable rebellion. In an era of equally contentious political and social times, music (the renewable resource that it is) continues the tradition of supplying audiences and fans a place to rebel and openly take part in collective dissent. The immense success of Green Day's politically charged album *American Idiot*, along with albums from Neil Young to the Dixie Chicks, prove that the public is listening to voices of challenge within the music industry. Perhaps by examining a group who dealt with these problematic borders of commercialism and dissent can help provide some insight into the role of music in revolutions of all sizes to come.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Fighting in the Streets: Understanding the Undercurrent of Rebellion in Rock**

In many ways the career of the MC5 can best be described as an experiment in power. This experiment not only refers to the band's hard-driving sound, but also to its role as a counter-cultural force that tested the parameters of rebellion, as it sought to create broad social and political change. The group was at the forefront of the White Panther Party (WPP), a collective which advocated for the end of capitalism, gave full support to the Black Panther Party's initiatives, and had other revolutionary aims that brought the band to the attention of local, state and federal authorities. For these authorities, the band became a symbol of a threatening, amorphous youth rebellion. For other observers, the band represented either the promise or the failure of music as tool of social change.

Through their music, the MC5 consciously articulated the meaning of rebellion in the youthful expression of rock. Although rebellion had always been associated with rock from its very inception, the connection was implicit rather than an explicit part of a program of social change. From its very beginning following World War II, rock had been an instrument of youth resistance and rebellion to the social mores of the 1950s and 1960s, but it was also embedded in a market system that reinforced social hierarchies. The MC5 also faced this contradiction, even as it openly fostered a useable rebellion, already located, to some degree, in the history of rock. .

“Useable rebellion” refers to the inherent rebellious nature of rock that has both allowed producers and consumers to partake in rebelling in a safe spot that can be

secured for the price of a concert ticket, t-shirt or album. However, this space is owned by dominant power structures and major corporate interests who make immense profits from selling rock as both a social and economic practice. "Useable rebellion" is a process inherently promised by and contained within rock, in which participants including audiences, artists, and critics to differing extents use music to actively question the world around them. This rebellion is no more directed than Marlon Brando's response in the *The Wild One* of "Watcha got?" to the pressing question of the film, "What are you rebelling against?" This foundational and often times generic ethos of rebellion in rock can be momentary or lasting, subversive or reinforcing of the dominant power structures on which it depends for its distribution and reception. Despite this fluidity, some kind of reification of identity through questioning takes place for those investing themselves. Rebellion is alive in rock because through it, the music maintains its freshness. The viability of rebellions is debated, showing itself in discussions of authenticity and selling out, youth culture, sexuality and in some cases like the MC5, politics.

This is the process that was tested through the MC5's association with the White Panther Party. Here rock's constant, but often broadly articulated sense of challenge and subversion that it had been dependent upon was given a public testing ground with the MC5 and the White Panther Party. Though not intended by its creators to be a formal revolutionary political party, the band found itself at the center of these foundational concerns of how far could rock really go in mobilizing dissent, and how much could a product of popular culture mean to its audience.

Because the MC5's band members were highly conscious of the contradiction

between rebellion and consumption, they are an interesting lens through which to view the meaning of rock in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By mobilizing the powers and energies of subversion associated with rock from its birth, the band and the WPP were able to test the social and political possibilities of music. The Party and the MC5 also raised questions about the role of capitalism by harnessing this subversive energy within rock, as had been successfully done since the 1950s. Due to their dependence on a major record label, a contentious debate ensued amongst their critics wondering if such expressions of dissent could be valid when contained within the same system of capital it sought to destroy.

The long-standing debate among musicians and critics concerning the social possibilities of music, caught between commerce and authenticity, is the focus of this chapter. A historical perspective on how rock has been tied into a market system gives us perspective about the music's power in challenging conceptions of social identity and its ability to create moral panic. A history of rock also demonstrates how this rebellion was successfully sold to youth including the members of MC5 and other important figures in the life of the band and the White Panther Party, such as Ministry of Information and counter-cultural guru, John Sinclair. The chapter will also examine the role of authenticity in the debate about the viability of rebellion in rock. Authenticity, especially in relationship to major corporate interests, still solicits debate among audiences as to what role bands and rock have in really shaping a challenge to a capitalist system. Notions of purity and degeneration in the face of capital have often been tied to discussions of the lineage and place of rock in society.

The MC5 could not escape this critique, even as it articulated its version of youth rebellion. Along with its cohort, the WPP, and members of the surrounding youth community in Michigan, the MC5 became an experiment in semiotic and sonic warfare, challenging local, state and national authorities while attempting to inspire counter-cultural values in audiences. Contingents of that audience and some critics viewed the MC5's music as a meaningless marketing ploy. Between these polarities social locations were dynamically challenged and reified by the band and their listeners.

### **The Revolution Will Be Televised, Recorded and Appearing at a Venue Near You**

Changes in the music industry and in media technologies in the post-war period allowed for the widespread introduction of rock. The breakdown of the monopoly created by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), the introduction of television and the transistor radio, and the successful creation and marketing of the 33 1/3 and 45 RPM record allowed for a recontextualization of music in everyday life. Due to the increasing venues for music and the opening of the music publishing and recording industries more music was needed to fill in these gaps. Here the independent record companies came into play. Such labels as Sun Records and Atlantic began to provide artists with a less centralized recording and distribution system. Geoffrey Hull chronicles this watershed in the recording industry in the post-war period when "rock and roll jolted record sales into ever higher gear," resulting in rising profits" and an increasingly formalized distribution system (Hull 71, 2). Compared to \$189 million in 1950, the rise of rock and targeting of the newly anointed "teenage audience"

pushed total album sales up to \$600 million dollars in 1960 (Hull, 2). Hull discusses how “mom and pop operations” benefited initially from this economic boom, in effect marking a breakdown of the major recording interest’s oligopoly. This economic shift to the independent labels reached a pinnacle in 1958 when their recordings represented an astounding 76% of singles on the music charts (Hull 29). These market developments and a new generation of consumers in the mass mediated age caused upheaval in the music industry. A generational rift was developing because of the introduction of new technologies and the creation of the “teenager” as a cultural identity. The independent labels could exploit this rift in their marketing strategies.

Now able to potentially compete on a national scale for radio play, the independent labels could sell to a large upcoming niche market, the baby-boom generation, now anointed by market interests as “teenagers.” This youth market had extra spending cash, supported by a Gross National Product, which rose from \$200 billion to \$360 billion between 1940 and 1954 (Szatmary 23). This niche market ultimately made rock a successful multi-mediated phenomenon.

Because of economic, technological, and social change, the recording industry made rebellion a central dimension of rock’s success, a message delivered through film, television, radio, and record sales. Robert Albrecht, in *Mediating the Muse*, explains that the newborn genre was difficult to contain, especially semiotically,

The staid performances of swing bands-musicians in tuxedos sitting behind monogrammed shields and waiting for their turn to blow a few notes-would have hardly made for good television. But rock ‘n’ roll was different. Here was youth,

action, and unbridled excitement. Taking their cues from the flamboyant performances of rhythm and blues musicians, the artists of rock 'n' roll whirled and whined, screamed and jumped across the stage and into the American living room (159).

He further points out that especially with new development of the visual turn in society, brought on by the vast success of television, rock was a new and semiotically fascinating form. Rock effectively made the image as important as the message.

If rock could be considered a revolution, the revolution was most certainly televised. Rock harnessed the potentiality of a multi-mediated world. Performers like Elvis Presley, who gyrated his hips to the beat, or Jerry Lee Lewis who pounded the piano with various appendages, encouraged a new perspective on popular music, especially aimed at the emerging buying power of the baby-boomer generation. David Szatmary sees this visual turn as intrinsically linking rock with moral panic over youth rebellion. Elvis' television appearances highlight this connection. Szatmary writes:

By the end of the year (1956) Ed Sullivan, who earlier had condemned Presley as 'unfit for a family audience' agreed to pay the new rock star \$50,000 for three appearances on his show, one of the most popular television programs in America at the time (51).

Reactions to the performances were harshly received in numerous circles including the American clergy. Much of this focus remained on the signifiers of Presley's sexuality and his violation of racial taboos: Reverend William Shannon wrote in the Catholic Sun: "Presley and his voodoo of frustration and defiance have become symbols in our country,

and we are sorry to come upon Ed Sullivan in the role of promoter. Your Catholic viewers, Mr. Sullivan, are angry.” Evangelist Billy Graham, who had not seen Elvis, commented that he was ‘not sure I’d want my children to see’ him (Szatmary 55).

It seems the creation of this post-war notion of “teenager” allowed both successful marketing as well as a successful othering/exoticizing of youth. Presley, as rock’s gyrating poster-child represented to the American populace the face of this newly established music. Combined with the raucous sounds of the music, Presley as a visual embodiment of rock provided a neatly packaged target for those fearing rock’s influence on youth and on American culture.

Szatmary aims that the image of the rebellious youth, as embodied in Elvis Presley, was also personified in major films of the time that stoked moral panic. *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *The Wild One* (1953), and especially *Blackboard Jungle* (1955)-were the most important of these. *Blackboard Jungle* was the first motion picture to use a rock song, “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and the Comets. If the “image of the alienated, shiftless, and violent street tough in black leather jacket who dangled a cigarette from his lips” (Szatmary, 54) was becoming a symbol of collective fear, then rock was the soundtrack for these icons of rebellion, with jazz now taking on a stodgy traditionalism.

Fears of juvenile delinquency were joined by fears of deviance and a disintegration of class, race, and gender hierarchies as rock became more and more popular. Michael Ochs, a leading musical archivist, states:

If rock was the soundtrack to our lives, then these soundtrack albums had to



encapsulate any of the teen topics of interest-automobiles, assorted fads, sexuality, rebellion, escape, energy, life, death, loneliness, dancing and dating (Qtd. in Waksman, 10).

Rock seemed to ignore all notions of societal taboo, an image conveyed through the mass media. Boundaries of race were of special interest as rock unashamedly brought together black and white audiences and artists in a time of racial upheaval. In an examination of popular music in Britain, Dick Bradley contends that racial boundaries especially created a joyous space of subversion for youth:

It is the nature of the developing codal fusion over the years that young people should be more familiar with, and less puzzled or affronted by, the Afro-American elements in popular music than their parents and elders. This fact gave rock 'n' roll, rhythm 'n' blues, soul and Beat their shock value and their capacity to act as a 'secret for the young' (121).

Violations of class hierarchies also played a role. More so in the United Kingdom, but also latently ruminating in the American mindset, youth culture and rock were a fundamental challenge to class boundaries as well. Most labels and artists popularized in the early life of rock reflected a southern, working-class aesthetic; challenging dominant conceptions of what performing artists should sound and look like. A youth audience was attracted to a working class aesthetic, and found their way to this aesthetic through middle-class consumption: "This leisure style was created through the appropriation of consumption goods-clothes, haircuts, records, etc..." (Bradley 85). Hence, youth could purchase a challenge to racial, sexual and class lines simply by investing in a record.

Youth, rock and rebellion fused into a semiotic system, to which many people reacted with hostility. Frank Sinatra stated that rock was, "...sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons, and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration and sly, lewd, in plain fact dirty, lyrics it manages to be the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the Earth" (Qtd. in Altschuler, 6). In their tell-all investigative report of youth culture at the time *U.S.A. Confidential*, journalists Lait and Mortimer wrote,

with tom-toms and hot jive and ritualistic orgies of erotic dancing, weed smoking and mass mania, with African jungle background. Many music shops purvey dope; assignations are made in them. White girls are recruited for colored lovers... We know that many of platter-spinners are hopheads. Many others are Reds, left-wingers or hecklers of social convention... Through disc jockeys, kids get to know colored and other musicians; they frequent places the radio oracle plug, which is done with design... to hook juves [juveniles] and guarantee a new generation subservient to the Mafia (Qtd. in Altshuler 6).

One can see in *Confidential*, a book hoping to provide some insight to a generation of perplexed parents who looked to youth/rock culture was a supposedly bordered and segmented area where societal ideologies and values were openly questioned. Here was a "folk devil" that could be a focal point of societal fears of testing dominant white ideology. As Dick Hebdige stated in his now classic study of subculture, "The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle with

signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life.” He continues that stylistic transformations “go ‘against nature’ interrupting the process of ‘normalization.’ As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority,’ which challenges the principles of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus” (18).

Rock was a tool of style and signification. The economic challenge put forth by smaller companies against the dominant record industry, the confrontation of new technology in the hands of a new generation, the challenge to social boundaries, and issues of sexuality provided the wellspring of value-laden arguments for and against the rise of rock. These ideological challenges allowed a fundamental identity for rock to emerge that would operate as a framework from which validity and authenticity would be gauged even as rock became an international industry.

### **Making Sense of the Rebellion**

Obviously, the complex history of rock and rebellion warrants much more attention than is allowed in these last few pages. However, the MC5 provides a concrete case for seeing these forces in action. Against this backdrop, the band emerged in the 1960s to push the foundations of rock’s relationship with rebellion.

This helped to sell the music to a youthful audience, which would or would not buy into the inherent values already discussed. This was a successful strategy as the 60s music industry saw a reclamation of the charts by major corporate interests as rock proved to be a continuing revenue producer. Vanilla-ized (a term used by Pat Boone) rock proved that the music, visuals and messages of the music, whether a potential

corrupting force or not, could sell. The White Panther Party's call for "rock roll dope and fucking in the streets" was a promise to partake in the full potential of youthful rebellion seemingly evidenced in rock's early life. It was a realization of the power of youth and its ties to the music. Tied to political and culturally revolutionary ideals, it also tested how authentically one could be tied to rebellion and how much one was beholden to corporate hegemony.

As a test case, the MC5 provoked debate amongst music critics, artists, audiences and scholars over the conflict between authenticity and commerce in popular music. The 1950s set the standards for expectations and ideas concerning the role of rock. Conceptions of authenticity can be traced to the conflict between rebellion and commerce, as audiences rejected or accepted the music as a cultural form. As Bradley postulates, "teenagers and young adults engaged in 'resistant' and rebellious cultural practices, which defined them as youth or sub-cultural members. And music-use, including music-making, was tied up with the process from the beginning" (99). The more potentiality to reaffirm a rebellious youthful identity, through products of rock, the more authentic the product is seen by those taking part. The economic, technological, social, and cultural questions issued at rock's inception would set the standards as to what "real" and "authentic" rock music and culture would be. The further the music supposedly steps away from youth and rebellion, the more it is suspect and the more degeneration is seen from an ideal level of purity.

### **Rebellion, Degeneration and the Dance of Authenticity**

In "Concerning the Progress of Rock & Roll," Michael Jarrett examines what he

calls “conventionalization” as the “foundational myth of popular music” (167). He describes the tendency for rhetoric of “degeneration” to enter our understanding of popular music in everyday life (168). Jarrett contends rock lives with an ethos where, bad (commercial) things happen to ‘authentic’ music is sufficient to generate the real/fake distinction that has become musical common sense. It creates a consumer who understands the history of rock as a series of authentic moments that deteriorated into conventionalized moments, transforming the music into a field of ‘commercial’ imitations of some real thing, and it prompts histories organized around the proper names of acknowledged innovators (172).

Degeneration is at the “heart of all distinctions that attempt to delineate a boundary between the authentic and the commercial, in whatever guise that may take: rock vs. pop, black vs. white, modern vs. postmodern, art vs. commerce” (168).

Useable rebellion is a practical tool from which to gauge the alleged process of degeneration. Rock’s foundational ethos is one that depends on supposedly authentic challenges to the status quo predominately from a youthful perspective. Deviation from a youthful voice or deviations from themes or styles connotating dissent are seen as suspect. In *Rock ‘Til You Drop* John Strausbaugh sermonizes that, “*Rock is youth music*. It is best played by young people, for young people, in a setting that is specifically exclusionary of their parents and anyone their parents’ age. It is music of youthful energies, youthful rebellion, youthful anxieties and anger” (2). He continues later, in reference to older artists’ continuing commercial appeal, “Colostomy rock is not rebellion, it’s the antithesis of rebellion: it’s nostalgia.” He adds, “And nostalgia is the

death of rock. We were supposed to die before we got old. Now look at us. Woo woo, Mick! Rock on Bruce!”(10).

One can stand witness here to the pervasive and continuing power of youth rebellion in evaluating the authenticity of rock music. Strausbaugh warns us about nostalgia as being the death-knell of rock. Nostalgia is, in effect, creating a stasis in a music that depends on its ability to subvert societal lethargy. Strausbaugh, far from being alone, is part of a much larger societal perception that true rock is not nostalgic, but always cutting edge. The reality of thinking that nostalgia is a death-knell to a youthful and dissident music is to partake in a form of nostalgia itself; Strausbaugh is pining for a form that supposedly once was in an idealistic time and place.

One of Strausbaugh’s targets is the MC5. His discussion of the band reflects his broader contention that “the movers and shakers of rock were always exemplars of hip capitalism, paying empty lip service to social change and ‘the revolution’ but always far more focused on money and glamour and personal gratification” (15). The connection of degeneration and rebellion is further evident in the author’s claim that, “It wasn’t just the hairlines that had receded: the political commitment, the anger, the will to change that permeated the original music was also gone”(14). His examination of the MC5, The Jefferson Airplane and the Fugs rates the subjects based upon an absolute, regenerating fundamental nostalgia of youthful rebellion that Strausbaugh has essentialized as the foundation of rock. The key issue for Strausbaugh is the authenticity of the band’s political commitment. In the end his judgment is, “They made the media look and sound more cool, the better to market their products and their advertisers” (91).

The debate over authenticity and rebellion, as witnessed in Jarrett's and Strausbaugh's history of rock, is a lasting one. Simon Frith matter-of-factly states that rock is a commercial form of music. It, like jazz, the pre-eminent music of rebellion before rock, has grown and developed within the realities of an economy based on capital (54). What has been successfully sold to audiences, he says, is the aesthetic of rebellion, "The 1950s images of rebellion without a cause merged with the 1960s images of rebellion with a cause..." (64). This was not done though without understanding the needs of the audiences. Rock from its inception has had to understand its audiences and offer them products that met their needs as youth living in the post war American landscape. "Rock," explains Frith, "is a capitalist industry and not a folk form, but its most successful products do, somehow, express and reflect its audience's concerns" (62).

The hope is that music can be a useable counter-hegemonic force in which social dissatisfaction can be communicated and control and mastery in one's life can be reasserted against the pressures of the outside world (Frith 262). Frith states that one of the reasons audiences and critics can ignore the realities of capital is that audiences in the end are able to control and manipulate these texts within their individual lives. In Frith's perspective the interplay of collective and personal needs even within the context of commercialization, can still be seen as potentially revolutionary or authentic in terms of audiences' uses of the music itself (264-265). In the end, this search for authenticity gave listeners a "sense of freedom that was, simultaneously, a sense of rootlessness and estrangement" (262).

Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo critique Frith for putting too much emphasis

on audience reception. Instead, the authors see economics as indeed the determining factor, which shape the ability of audiences to receive and make use of music. To Chapple/Garofalo this very notion of rebellion is less a real tool that audiences use within the music and rather is an autonomous zone that could be reached through consumption: “The creation of a teen culture was clearly not a revolutionary development, but it did distance young people to a certain degree from home and church, and provided a wedge from which inchoate rebellion could be expressed, if not yet directed *at* the establishment” (298). As rock evolved as a musical form associated with youth, it also evolved as a commercial product:

The position of the music as an increasingly important cultural commodity within a consumer economy weakened any of the explicit antimaterialist content of the music. The sexually liberating aspects of the music remained, but sexual liberation itself was integrated into the system as an important selling tool for the ‘liberated’ economy (300).

Chapple and Garofalo continue that sexuality was not the only topic subsumed by a march to capital:

And finally, the music became separated from the political ferment that had provided it with its critical edge (as well as themes and images) in the earlier sixties. Musicians and the creative personnel within the music industry were integrated into an entertainment business now firmly part of the American corporate structure (300).

The music was so effective in reaching youth, that it was hegemonically subsumed into



the capitalist world (306 & 308). The authors consider this a co-optation in which audiences had very little input and which is demonstrative of the top-down realities of power and control in modern musical practice. They emphasize production over Frith's focus on consumption. However, Chapple and Garofalo as well as Frith are aware of the important role of capital no matter how much they believe that audiences construct their own meanings. Both believe that audiences should be able to claim music as their own, even as a tool to subvert dominant power structures.

To counteract this top-down view of the masses and their relationship to authenticity, one can look at the work of Keith Negus to explain the complex intricacies of the industry in its relationship to authenticity. Instead of industry corrupting culture or exploiting dissent and rebellion, Negus asserts that a false binary is created between the industry and the people. Instead, the music industry is built upon larger cultural values and beliefs, which are essentially shared. Rather than a threatening edifice, the industry is composed of ordinary people who represent the larger culture. Through these participants, the industry both shapes and is shaped by the culture around it. (18, 30).

The creation of genres, in Negus' perspective is a way for corporate cultures to make sense of and to market musical forms. It is a resource for audiences to make sense of and consume authenticity and to partake in potential subversion in ideology or action. Genres are "unstable intersections of music industry and media fans and audience cultures, musician networks and broader social collectives informed by distinct features of solidarity and social identity" (174). Genres allow us to affirm our beliefs and wants concerning who we are and what our past is. It provides comfort in an immense and

unfamiliar world. It also allows the pleasure of breaking these boundaries. In the case of the MC5 it was possible to feel a sense of community with the band and their embracing of rock as a subversive form, as well as enjoy the group's progressive and heavy sound that challenged genre conventions of the time when compared to dominating San Francisco psychedelic acts of the time like the Jefferson Airplane.

The use-value of genres and their ability to help us discern and consume popular culture is accomplished through successfully communicating authentic feelings and experiences for their audiences. The discussion of authenticity that Negus, Frith and Chapple/Garofalo engage in revolves around notions of purity. In terms of rock's purity, concerns about how much audiences, artists and the industry create a music that is able to overcome corporate influence is a key topic. Like country and jazz, which are often understood as authentic forms emerging organically from distinct communities, rock is a music that supposedly found its voice and its power in an emerging youth culture with its own mores. The music is then as Jarrett explains, held to romantic notions of purity and eventual degeneration. The ability or inability to overcome corporate power and to harness the energy of the music is the focus of these conversations, demonstrating the lasting influence of useable rebellion for those taking part in it.

The MC5 was both heralded as a revolutionary force and as a corporate sham because of their abilities to draw in these foundational elements of the discussion of rebellion and hence, authenticity. This was done in an incredibly intense and combative fashion through their association with the White Panther Party. The affection and disregard they garnered often centered on this ability to test these parameters of rebellion

within rock. A question loomed over their short association with the WPP about what happens when a band attempts to cash this promissory note of useable rebellion in rock. In this autonomous zone one could rebel with a cause, politically, culturally or musically through the music of the band. One could also rebel without a cause, partaking in rock's favorite hedonistic topics of sex, drugs or just momentary release when encountering the music. One could also be simply without a clue in dismissing this generic rebellion as something that could be written off as meaningless drivel.

The MC5 and those associated with the band soon were to learn that these modes of reception could not be controlled: amongst their fans, amongst the authorities or even amongst themselves. The foundational themes and promises of rebellion that rock offered to the public en masse would find a spectrum of interpretations and uses. Included, were impassioned concerns about authentic youthful expression, the identity it provided to those invested as well as rock's possible effect on national security and the American way of life. Discussion of commerce versus authenticity would be of central concern during the tumultuous years of protest and dissent in the late 60s and early 70s and beyond. How much of a role music could play, if any, in the charge for social change highlighted these continuing debates about rock and what it has come to mean to the many that have heavily invested in it to develop social locations.

### **Media Frames and Their Importance in the Measuring the MC5's Authenticity**

Adding to this discussion of authenticity within music scholarship, the notion of media framing can provide a larger perspective for what Negus describes as the complexity of interactions among audiences, musicians and producers. The MC5 and

their association with the White Panther Party solicited a great deal of press, from coverage in *Time* to Sinclair's self-generated press in the *5<sup>th</sup> Estate* and the *Ann Arbor Sun*. These media outlets negotiated the meaning of the band and its mission and provide a picture of the group for a general audience. While the band and the Party didn't necessarily have a coherent plan for self-representation, these media frames could control that representation through vilification or romanticization. . The use of familiar cultural frames by media outlets provided audiences with a limited understanding of what was happening with the youth in their communities. . The following chapters will demonstrate that the MC5 is a textbook example of this process. Numerous individuals and frames used for the band described them as a spearhead for a cultural revolution, as a way for ordinary youth to become rock stars and to get girls, as a hollow sham to sell records, as a radical threat to national security, as a recruiter for the counterculture, as a major or minor influence in rock, and as an exploiter of mass media outlets for purposes of dissent and the promotion of anarchism.

The historical influence of the media on social movements and their role in the creation of ideology is important in garnering a full understanding of useable rebellion. This power was especially visible in the 1960s as the mainstream media's presentation of Vietnam and the anti-war movement helped sway public opinion. Todd Gitlin, a former head of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and a significant name in the New Left, sees the media as the primary means for the promotion of dominant ideologies (2). He explains that social movements, such as SDS, were made digestible and consumable through the mainstream media's use of framing techniques. This created simple binaries.

As they were represented in the media the MC5 and the White Panther Party often reflect a binary in representation, making them either authentic dissidents or dismissible fakes. In essence, the media influences social movements much more so than their leaders would like to admit. Mainstream media demands spectacle, and group leaders gain visibility for their causes through spectacle. The band and the White Panther Party well understood the importance of spectacle and media assault but like Gitlin could not, frustratingly enough, control their representations within the media completely. Sinclair especially attempted to manage the image of the band and the WPP in numerous independent newspapers as revolutionary heroes. These did little for the general populace when compared to features in major publications like *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Like Gitlin, Benford and Snow have been leaders in the development of framing theory when looking at political and social movements. According to the two, frames “help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Benford/Snow, 614). The association of rock with youth and rebellion was accomplished primarily through what Benford and Snow have called “adversarial,” “prognostic,” and “motivational” framing. The first of these frames, “adversarial,” seeks to “delineate the boundaries between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and construct movement protagonists and antagonists” (616). Commentaries in major press sources used this framing technique to pit rock and its audience against the prevailing social mores. The MC5 was held to adversarial frames especially from critics of the band like Lester Bangs, who looked at it as a countercultural fake that hid sub-par musical vision. He criticized “the hype, the thick overlay of teenage revolution and total-energy-thing

which conceals these scrap yard vistas” (Bangs 34).

Other public commentaries used, “prognostic framing,” issuing a “plan of attack” which put cultural activists and supporters of the music “on the defensive, at least temporarily” (617). As a potential force of change, rock successfully subsumed youthful rebellion in reaction to the moral condemnation that it received from prominent public figures like Billy Graham and Frank Sinatra. The audience and industry was able to create successful spaces of rebellion set apart from condemnation, and in a Hebdigian sense, take pleasure in a display of otherness. The MC5 found themselves on the defensive from prognostic frames. In *Disc and Music Echo* Caroline Boucher wrote, “the reaction they achieve is such that the MC5 seem to have earned the reputation of being the enfants terribles of America.”(Boucher). Guitarist Wayne Kramer complained that their reputation in the press had compromised their abilities to deal with promoters. He told Boucher: “Promoters think we're going to go out and burn things. They hear incredible rumors of how we kill cats on stage and run around stark naked” (Boucher). The band’s propaganda machine put together by Sinclair used prognostic frames as well to combat their detractors and to progressively quell such negative press that might compromise their ability to be heard.<sup>i</sup>

Finally, through “motivational framing” the media can provide “socially constructed vocabularies” give audiences “compelling accounts for engaging in collective action and for sustaining their participation.” (617). Thus, the band’s promoter, John Sinclair, produced an aggressive propaganda in various publications. Through descriptions of the band’s performances and run-ins with the police, Sinclair created an

image of the band as heroic countercultural heroes capable of bringing the revolution single-handedly. Such a call evoked a mystical experience described as the “magic that can set you free”-, as “some mythical adolescent moment against which all subsequent rock moments can be judged” (Frith 176).

These framing models are effective in understanding cultural movements such as the creation of youth culture in the post war period and the construction and maintenance of rock, a form that the New Left looked to for insight and inspiration. The question might be asked as well, is rock inherently political because of its ability to recycle the presence of youth and rebellion? With the great popularity of rock, could social change actually be effected whether or not the music is perceived as organic or authentic? This is the question that the MC5 can help us understand, since they blurred the lines identified by scholars like Stanley Aronowitz who contend that there “were really two countercultures in the 60s.” First, there was “the political counterculture, those who engaged in the politics of direct democracy, who organized traditional constituencies in new ways.” Secondly, were, “the cultural radicals, the artists writers, and, above all, the rock musicians and their audience, for whom the erotic revolution was a political movement.” (36). Is it possible that music can ignite social change in political and cultural spheres? How powerful are audiences and bands when used as symbiotic organizing forces?

The association of rebellion and youth in rock were realities for individual members of the MC5 and the WPP. Within the band and amongst community members, some looked to music as an organizing force for dissent and action. Others found music

as a stepping-stone for financial gain and notoriety through a sonic assault on audiences. Often times these perspectives were mixed. Often times as well, the band and the Party were surprised at how effective they could be at exploiting the recording industry and the mainstream media. Audiences, musicians, producers, politicians and the federal government were all interested in this experiment and what it was to mean. For whatever political, commercial or “authentically” created aims, the band was to enter into a continuing debate on rock and rebellion, remaining a cornerstone of its focus for decades to come.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Revolution on Your Headphones: Charting Social Location in the Rise of the MC5 and the White Panther Party**

The interaction between popular culture and society is a constant site of struggle. From the studies of Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School, which viewed popular culture as a potential opiate for the masses, to Michel De Certeau who claimed that the masses were able to make their own worlds with the raw materials popular culture provided; the dividing lines between popular and other forms of culture were conceived as a contested domain. The rise of the MC5 and the revolutionary entity for whom they acted as organizers, the White Panther Party, is demonstrative of this complex interplay. In the collective, a musical act and a radical movement were intertwined.

Popular culture was infused with national and local politics and a desire for social change as represented in the MC5's music. The Party was meant to be a channel through which the band and other associated individuals like John Sinclair, who was a leader of various housing collectives and workshops around the City of Detroit, could express frustrations with the political and social realities of their time (Sinclair 1972, 104). The MC5 acted as the Party's sonic organizing force, bringing together audiences through their music.

This chapter looks to understand how this political and musical force came into being, and to understand why the MC5 and the White Panther Party would become potent organizations in popular music and radical politics, creating a space for useable rebellion, a concept that surrounded them from the advent of rock, especially with the "British

Invasion.” Interviews conducted with band members have revealed that, although reflecting disparate notions of what the MC5 and the White Panther Party symbiosis was supposed to mean and how far it was hoping to go, a commonality existed amongst these five young men. They shared a common background and upbringing in post-war Detroit. This background fundamentally shaped how individual members came to view the world around them. The interviews reveal that numerous factors came into play in the formation of the band and the Party. Issues of civil rights, anti-war sentiment, technological innovations, drug use and musical influences combined to make a product unique to its time and context. These numerous concerns were linked through the band’s affinity for rock as a potential sight of rebellious discourse and action. The band actively consumed and eventually found a voice of rebellion in rock that called for both hedonism and revolution.

That rebellion was deeply tied to the local milieu of Detroit. The group and the Party had roots and eventually would find fame in the late 1960s Detroit landscape, where such nationally pertinent issues like race and class would confront them through immediate experience. The message would spread and many voices would join in shaping the WPP. At its pinnacle the WPP possessed 30-40 core members, hundreds of local participants and chapters across the country and in Europe (Kramer 2006).

This assessment begins a focus on perspectives from surviving band members concerning the life of the White Panther Party and its relationship to the trajectory of the MC5. This perspective, although featured in some studies of the band is often overlooked in favor of perspectives predominately from John Sinclair, who is often

viewed as the overwhelming force behind the development of the WPP.<sup>ii</sup> Responsibility for the WPP's life and work was much more distributed than has been popularly thought.

The following pages examine the views of those remaining band members and of course one needs to remember that time has probably reframed these views. It is a concern when looking into groups and figures of this time, that there may exist among those initial active agents still alive, a want to manage their legacies. The band and those associated with them have still not come to a common ground regarding the life and legacy of the MC5's and the WPP's political and revolutionary associations. Media frames and reactions from critics over time have presented the band as either an organic hope or an exploitative ruse, which eventually pushed the individuals involved into different realms of intent and hope and folded back into their self-perception. Nevertheless, the invaluable interviews upon which this chapter is based are surprisingly telling, frank and aware of folly when discussing political and revolutionary thought. Music is the place where MC5 members hope to retain their legend; the revolution is often the theme that has gotten in the way of this hope.

### **Detroit Divided: Race and Class and Their Effect on a Music Movement**

Before beginning to understand the contextual framework of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Detroit we have to reach back several decades to grasp fully the intensity of racial and class discord in everyday life. These social realities would significantly come to shape the political and musical expression of the band. Detroit historian Richard Thomas describes the first four decades in the twentieth century as a period of massive change in Detroit's population because of immigration and migration. According to

Thomas, arguably the most significant influence on Detroit was the “Great Migration” of African-Americans hoping for opportunities in the industrial sector (24-25).

The demand for cheap labor during World War I and numerous immigration restrictions during the first three decades of the twentieth century pushed poor southerners, namely African-Americans, to be heavily recruited populations by the northern industrial sector up until the beginning of the Depression. Because of automakers’ need for labor, Henry Ford promised five dollars a day to potential laborers. The needs of the automobile industry coupled with demands from iron, rail, and steel industries, pushing Detroit to become one, if not the most popular destination for migrating southerners (25-26). In his *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Thomas J. Sugrue explains that the increased demand for labor extended through the Second World War and into the decades following (Sugrue 23). Union and civil rights organizations further opening the labor market to the black populace marked this “Second Great Migration,” lasting from 1940-1970. Especially during the war, unions “opened many locals to black membership, lobbied for civil rights protection, and supported the hiring of black workers.” The UAW in the early 1940s “forged an alliance with black churches and reform organizations, especially the NAACP,” that firmly established new levels of representation in the workplace and in the community for African-Americans of the time (26).

Due to this rapid expansion of the black community, the population of the Detroit area changed significantly. The influx of African-Americans was seen as a threat to white industrial workers as the black population more than doubled in the 1940s from 149,119

to 300,506. This change created a thriving environment for racial and class conflict due to competition for jobs and changing ethnic and racial lines in neighborhoods. These issues were exacerbated with the eventual economic downturns that plagued the city through periods of recession and deindustrialization. White homeowners and real estate agents created and reinforced strict racial covenants in Detroit neighborhoods (Sugrue 44). A de facto racial segregation persisted due to these covenants and other racial practices in the real estate market.

The members of the MC5, Wayne Kramer, Fred “Sonic” Smith, Rob Tyner, Dennis “Machine Gun” Thompson and Michael Davis grew up in this climate: the Detroit metropolitan area, mostly Lincoln Park. The economic and social realities of the area would be a constant influence on future band members, as living in Lincoln Park (also referred to as living “down river”) “was to reside within the spitting distance of Rouge, the Ford Motor Company’s central plant” (Simmons/Nelson, 15). The neighborhood was one dominated by white and black autoworkers. Guitarist Fred Smith’s parents who were white natives of West Virginia reflected the labor migration, moving to Detroit in the hope of finding better opportunities for employment (16).

Drummer Dennis Thompson sees this industrial background as one that greatly influenced his music. By the time the MC5 coalesced in the mid to late 1960s, Detroit had already been home to numerous musicians who reflected the working class aesthetic of rock. These included John Lee Hooker, Highland Park native Bill Haley and many others (Barnett, 9-11). David Carson sees such figures as Haley and Hooker leading to a Detroit sound that embraced their identification with a “tough, gritty, unheralded

metropolis.” *Time* linked the urban industrial scene to the music, describing a “real Detroit sound, pulsating with the belch of its smokestacks and the beat of its machinery” (Carson ix). Suzanne Smith, in her *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* asserts that Berry Gordy, who founded the legendary Motown label actually used his familiarity with the production methods of companies like Ford: “Gordy implemented his idea of inserting the assembly-line process into the recording studio as soon as he founded Motown” by creating divisions of labor throughout the company including creation, management, quality control and marketing (14). Thompson claims that the working class background weighed heavily on their musical careers not only in their teenage years playing in various groups but also in their rise to fame and the radical politics of their later years:

Detroit is a working class, blue collar and at that time, primarily an industrial town. These are people who were coming from parents who worked in factories. These were children that were coming from working class backgrounds...where it’s a tough life. It’s a hard life...you work your 40 or 60 hour week and its boom, bang, crash and you’re turning out parts in a factory and basically you work very hard. You have callused fingers and dirty finger nails...so you want music that is pretty rough and tumble (Thompson 2005).

This rough and tumble aesthetic, born from industrial realities of life in urban Detroit, provided the MC5, along with numerous other acts, a distinct musical voice representing America’s “Arsenal of Democracy.” This ascription, from Thompson, makes sense in reference to artists like Hooker and Hank Ballard, as well as figures like Gordy who had

put time in at Detroit assembly lines or in Detroit steel factories before making music their careers (Carson 1-9, 35). Machine operatives and crafts workers overwhelmingly dominated the face of employment opportunities and positions in the Detroit area in the 1950 and 1970 census data (Farley 72). These jobs were fragile and highly susceptible to economic downturns due to the reliance on manufacturing. For example in 1950, fifty-six percent of all auto manufacturing in the United States was in Michigan. A decade later this number would fall to forty percent, drastically affecting the Detroit and Michigan area workforces (Sugrue 128). Less a romantic ideal and more an everyday fact of life, the working-class lifestyle would be hard to escape in post-war Detroit and would be reflected in the culture, including in the process of musical creation.<sup>iii</sup>

The industrial realities of Detroit in the post-war period had much more far-reaching influences than in just creating a working class background amongst its citizens. Drastic population change had direct impacts on the streets and in the neighborhoods of Detroit in heightening racial tension and strife amongst the City's inhabitants. By 1970 the black populace would dominate with more than 600,428 (45% of the total populace of Detroit) (Sugrue 23). The massive shift in population in just a few decades forced Detroiters to deal with established economic and racial lines being challenged.

Thomas Sugrue points to a lack of public housing and complete segregation as among the most contentious issues in Detroit. Rental agents, bankers and landlords looked to the black migration as a threat to real estate investments. The result of these racist views was the creation of black enclaves in the inner city (39-44). As of 1947, out of the 545,000 open housing units, only 47,000 were available to black tenants (Sugrue

43). Here as well, class and racial conflict would emerge from the territorializing of space, eventually resulting in “white flight” when these racist practices were challenged at local and national levels, in the courts and on the streets. Detroit’s enclaves represented the harsh economic realities of blacks in the community, who were disproportionately relegated to the lowest paying jobs on the economic ladder (99). The continuing discrimination and rising frustration of the community came to the national public eye especially in the 1967 Riot/Rebellion. In 1942 *Life* Magazine had featured a headline that stated, “Detroit is Dynamite” adding, “It can either blow up Hitler or blow up the U.S.,” in reference to the prominent racial tensions present in workplaces, and neighborhoods that included numerous strikes relating to issues of race and street skirmishes over residential racial lines (Sugrue 29). The end of 1967 had fulfilled the prophecy in both ways.

By 1967 the MC5 had been performing in Detroit area venues mostly as a cover band, playing such artists as Chuck Berry, The Yardbirds and other such influential acts of the time. From 1964 to 1966 they had become familiar with local counter-cultural leader John Sinclair through his Detroit Artists’ Workshop (DAW), a meeting place for artists, poets and musicians attracted to the “beat” movement. Band members would often hang around the commune participating in artistic creation and drug use. This artists’ collective would morph after 1966 into the Trans-Love Energies (TLE) collective which imagined itself as a communal fellowship pushing for societal change. The growth in perspective of the Trans-Love Energies collective, including the MC5, can be attributed to the increasing use of LSD and marijuana and the influence of rock, in what



was formerly a jazz-loving group. New poetry, music and other arts provided a way for members to culturally confront the realities of Detroit and their nation. This environment fostered the members of the band who began to hang out at the DAW and increasingly more as it morphed into Trans-Love Energies.

In Trans-Love Energies, the band and Sinclair forged a mutual partnership. The band sought out Sinclair as a means to increase their area audiences, and Sinclair looked to the band as a potential cultural force to enrich his commune. He found the energy and vigor of the band, which by this time had begun to experiment with distortion and noise in the hopes of emulating jazz improvisation, intriguing. The collective's publications including poems, posters, and newsletters as well as cultural events (e.g. poetry readings and art showings) would take on a decidedly more anti-authoritarian spirit in the hopes of exacerbating social tensions around them. Most importantly, they criticized governmental handling of the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War and thus increasingly drew the attention of the police.

The power wielded by Detroit authorities created frustration within the commune and band, a frustration that was entrenched when the collective became a target of police harassment during the 1967 Riot/Rebellion. Jeff Hale describes that, "A significant turning point in the history of Detroit was the bloody Rioting of July 24-31, 1967, the worst in America's history. Following the riots, the attitudes of Detroit police moved farther to the right, reflecting the growing siege mentality prevalent among many of the city's whites" (Hale). TLE felt the impact of this mentality immediately, with Kramer perhaps tellingly being accosted by the police during the Riots for allegedly being a

sniper (Kramer 2005). The real impetus for moving primarily was a result of the TLE being firebombed. Who actually carried out these bombings according to Kramer is a bit of a mystery due to a lack of police follow-up. Kramer believes the responsibility could rest with one of the following groups: "The Detroit Police Department. (a covert political ops unit). Right wing zealots like the John Birch society and Breakthrough. The federal government (FBI operation Cointel or White House covert operators)" (Kramer 2006). Whoever the culprit, the immediate threat to their safety pushed Sinclair and commune members to move to Ann Arbor.

Here, the band and Sinclair came together to found the White Panther Party, issuing the White Panther Statement on November 1, 1968. The group, reacting to the harsh class and racial realities of the Riot/Rebellion and of their lives in Detroit advocated for the complete support of the Black Panther Party, and for the end of the capitalist state (Sinclair 1972, 105). Like the Black Panther Party, the White Panther Party and their official house band, the MC5, reflected an end to innocence in the civil rights era. Notions of non-violent protest did not seem to match the violent retribution waged upon the African-American community. The Party looked to the brooding machismo of the Black Panthers as a model from which to confront the world around them:

Knowing the power of symbols in the abstract world of Americans we have taken the White Panther as our mark to symbolize our strength and arrogance and to demonstrate the commitment to the program of the Black Panther Party as well as to our own-indeed, the two programs are just part of the same whole (Sinclair

1972, 105).

From their new base in Ann Arbor, the White Panthers still focused on Detroit but looked to a national level for agitation, attempting to bring forth change by any means necessary. Sinclair remembers the band's participation at the Chicago "Festival of Life" during the 1968 Democratic Convention as a turning point in which he realized he had to look beyond Detroit, and "in order to preserve and develop our culture we couldn't ignore the political aspect of the Revolution anymore" (1972, 44). Detroit and Chicago seemed like microcosms of the national crisis that gripped the United States in the late 1960s.

### **The American Ruse: National Issues and the Rise of the MC5**

As the band developed into a nationally recognized act they were affected by political and social tensions at a national/international level. Drug culture, technological innovation, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement all played a role in shaping the White Panther Party and the MC5. The band's voice was unique to its time, and the issues that affected its members in the past were still very much with them as I discovered in my interviews with Michael Davis, Wayne Kramer and Dennis Thompson. (Smith and Tyner passed away in the early 1990s.)

Michael Davis, bass player for the MC5, argues that, "The MC5 was in a sense a victim of circumstance...a product of a time that is unique...a time that will never happen again, the situation, the conditions will never happen again never in a million years." Within these circumstances, he says, "something called dissent came out from under the covers" (Davis 2005). This dissent against the status quo came in numerous forms. For

example, the interviewees frequently reflected on their involvement in civil rights and feminist struggles. When asked about the influences that led to the band stepping up their anti-authoritarian message, Dennis Thompson states:

One was the minority movement...which was very powerful at the time. Female rights too...women still hadn't achieved any kind of equality whatsoever. It was still a pretty chauvinistic society and a pretty racist society and a pretty bigoted society (2005).

This statement, in regards at least to perspectives on feminism is a comment of hindsight that developed for band members over time as well as for Sinclair. The band's articulation of support for the black power movement was at times matched by their machismo. As Kramer reflected in our interview, "We were sexist pigs and we masqueraded under the guise of revolution our total hedonism" (Kramer 2005).

Although gender equality was something that eventually became a topic of importance for the interviewees, the realities of WPP rhetoric and the MC5's music did not reflect anything close to such recognition of the women's movement.

The WPP showed their support for civil rights and more specifically the black power movement through the MC5's music, such as the band's use of John Lee Hooker's "Motor City is Burning" on their first album, *Kick Out the Jams*. The interviews point to young men who were acutely aware of the realities of the struggle for African-American rights across the nation and could relate them to their experiences in Detroit. As guitarist Wayne Kramer remembers,

The White Panther became an expression of our frustration with the injustice that

we saw in the world around us, that we saw even in our own city in our own police department, in our own neighborhoods. It was a way to get it out to express ourselves where we would use this radical language. Then we identified with the Black Panther Party. They're young, they're brave...we like to think of ourselves as brave. They've got guns...so we got guns. They say there needs to be a White Panther party...we say okay...so here we are (2005).

Kramer, like Sinclair, saw the civil rights movement as a basis for cultural revolution. In the "White Panther Statement" Sinclair writes that, "The actions of the Black Panthers in America have inspired us and given us strength, as has the music of black America"(Sinclair 1972, 105). WPP propaganda maintained that rock, strongly influenced by African and African-American musical forms, was the main weapon in cultural warfare. The MC5 was meant to be the musical firepower in this contentious struggle. As Thompson remembers, the cultural revolution was to "help our black brothers be accepted as an equal faction of Americans...allowing them the opportunity for equal education and employment opportunities" (Thompson 2005).

Part of the group's and the Party's strategy for changing perceptions towards racial ascriptions and class divisions was through the use of drugs. Primarily the concentration was on LSD and marijuana. As stated in the "White Panther Statement," "Our program of rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets is a program of total freedom for everyone." It continues, "We are LSD-driven total maniacs in the universe. We will do anything we can to drive people out of their heads into their bodies" (Sinclair 1972, 104). This experimentation with drugs (especially LSD) led to the development

from the Detroit Artist Workshop, in which marijuana was the drug of choice, to the Trans-Love Energy group, which depended more on the use of LSD as a consciousness-raising tool. There also existed in the TLE a more heavy concentration on rock as a cultural force for several members of the band, especially Kramer and Rob Tyner and organizational leaders like Sinclair, Plamondon and Leni Sinclair (Sinclair 2005). Eventually, the White Panther Party would be born in 1968 from and through the actions of the Trans-Love Energies commune.

The White Panther Party and the MC5 looked to drug use as a potential method for breaking down social, cultural and political boundaries to varying levels. “Drugs played a large, large part in people becoming more open and less xenophobic and more open to discussing amongst themselves the state of their lives and their nation,” explains Thompson. Through sharing, drugs could potentially create a bridge for new forms of understanding: “You could sit down with a member of the Black Panther Party, smoke a joint and talk politics” (Thompson 2005). Members of the two parties, although not sharing an official relationship, did interact socially. Michael Davis states that although many of the drugs were new to the group, the early exposure to these influences heavily effected the band’s political and social perspective, and perhaps most importantly, the music which they made. Thompson shared in his interview that the band was heavily under the influence of these substances during the creation of their first album, *Kick Out the Jams*.

Drugs would continue to be a factor through the band’s short life, even after it discontinued its relationship with the White Panther Party. The influence of drugs would

both shape the band in its early days, as well as being perhaps the most influential factor in their demise in the early 1970s. Interviews revealed that soon the band would move beyond marijuana and LSD to what the Party labeled as “death drugs” including the widespread use of heroin amongst band members. Several members of the band would do prison time due to this use, and remaining members would contend that continued effects of these drugs played a role in the deaths of their two band-mates, Rob Tyner and Fred Smith.

LSD went far beyond the expectations of its developers in medical science laboratories and the U. S. military, which imagined its use in psychological warfare. For the band the realities of technology reached beyond the realm of drugs and instead reflected a general focus and valuing of massive technological innovation in society. Prior work on the MC5 often ignores an emphasis on technology as a contributing factor towards the formation of the band’s aesthetic. This influence would have been easily overlooked if it had not been for my face-to-face interviews with band members, especially with Michael Davis. To him, the focus on technological innovation is a key influence that shaped the perspectives of his generation “the key main element is this technology...basically the number one factor. We all grew up in post World War II” (Davis 2005)

Psychotropic drugs were representative of a larger scene of potentially destructive technological innovation. The dawn of the atomic age created a measure from which the future was calculated: “The creation of the nuclear war head...it was a break through in what human beings could do with the phenomena in which we live in” (Davis

2005). This connection would be a constant reminder for Davis of the destructive potential of technological advancement in society, a factor that would come directly to the public's eye through such events as the Cuban missile crisis and perhaps most importantly in terms of determining the band's and WPP's message, the Vietnam War, which will be discussed shortly.

Other technological advancements occurred in communications, including those that shaped the modern face of rock. Davis comments that the transistor fundamentally "changed society." It allowed for music to become a portable electronic form not only transported by people, but by automobiles in the 50s and 60s. Another communications innovation, breaking down space and time, was television, "We grew up with that...TV brought commercialization of everything! It was displayed...we kind of became victims of media" (Davis 2005). This understanding allowed a view into the power of media and its framing abilities in terms of issues of politics, commercialization and music. The new mass media technologies, as Gitlin states, "have become systems for the distribution of ideology" (2). The WPP along with other groups like the Yippies would harness this energy to develop a voice in American society. This same energy also eventually became their downfall.

This mediation would bring the sound of rock to homes and cars and therefore to a newly defined segment of the population, teenagers. Images and sounds of performers like Chuck Berry could be consumed daily by youth across the nation. In turn, new technologies of amplification and electric instruments could be bought by those same youth exposed to them by television, radio and records. They could emulate musicians



seen in the media: “You could buy an electric guitar for \$125 at Sears. The better stuff like Fenders and Gibsons, were way up to about \$300, but all within the reach of kids like us,” states Kramer (Simmons/Nelson, 15). The widespread purchasing of electronic instruments and amplifiers amongst this demographic could especially be seen after the worldwide success of the Beatles and the subsequent “British Invasion” in rock and roll. To return to a theme of the first chapter, technological innovation coupled with upturns in consumption habits helped create a space of useable rebellion where rock music was performed.

With such diverse influences as technological development, civil rights struggles, drugs and nuclear proliferation, one might be hard pressed to find any kind of unifying elements that could bind these subjects under one comprehensive umbrella. Yet, the interviews revealed that these diverse factors all needed to be understood under the growing influence of the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Vietnam overshadowed and at the same time brought together these concerns: “The essential...the umbrella under which all of these dynamics fell was the Vietnam War. If you dropped out of school...you were drafted. There was definitely a personal liability. Their ass could be on the line...They could go to some foreign jungle and die” (Thompson 2005). Drugs, anger about domestic social issues, advancements in technology both in the home and on the battlefield were channeled into the band’s anti-war stance which examined the effects of the war on social, political and cultural life. Media ensured a constant barrage of coverage and exposure to the war and these attendant issues:

We had drugs, we had rock and roll, we had social issues that were dissatisfying,

we had an emerging culture of people who were aware that things weren't quite kosher in normal life. That the government was feeding us a crock of shit. The guys who were supposed to be our leaders, the guys we were supposed to respect were just ramming us. We knew better. All these factors came together at once...then I met the MC5 (Davis 2005).

The White Panther Party was a way of concretely expressing resentment towards the government and powers-that-be, viewed as perverted monsters of Enlightenment thinking. The White Panther 10 Point Program provided a plan for the breakdown of these powers, “#9 Free all soldiers at once--no more conscripted armies!” and, “#10 Free the people from their phony ‘leaders’--everyone must be a leader--freedom means free every one! All Power to the People!” (Sinclair 1972, 105).

The extent of a WPP member's loyalty to this vision would be a point of confusion for the band, its audience, and its circle of influence. After the initial period of the Party's formation, the band sometimes diverged from the WPP's platform and was conceived as separate by the media. This mirrored the experience of other groups identified with the New Left where media would reshape movements into palatable forms that for Gitlin and SDS stripped them of the original intent. Gitlin states that this media framing process had real ramifications, robbing the SDS, for example, of their own meaning and representation; “I worked in a movement and watched it construed as something quite other than what I thought it was” (17). The creation of the band by both band members and the media is the focus of the following chapters.

### **The Music is What it was About: Assembling the Sound**

Interviews with the band and with John Sinclair reveal that the musical life of the group is hard to reconstruct amid the political ascriptions the band has collected over the past 40 years. Although interviews today express a certain frustration with the politics overshadowing the music, in the minds of certain individuals involved at the time, like Kramer, music was his politics. Music was the means by which one could make sense of and comment on the world around oneself. Yet, one only has to listen to the band's catalog to see that lyrically this did not equal out to an overwhelming prevalence of revolutionary rhetoric. In context to the musical world in which they lived, however, revolution could be more a sonic than lyrical undertaking. This section is devoted to seeking an understanding of the musical background of the group, in order to start to discern the lasting musical influence that the band has had. This is a sound that, as many critics would attest, has heavily influenced punk, metal and beyond (i.e. the use of distortion, dissonance, etc.).

The diversity of influences cited by the band crisscrosses genre boundaries and sounds. The MC5 seems to have been a sponge for countless influences that ranged from the Motown sound that surrounded them in their adolescence to such legendary names in experimental jazz as Sun Ra. One of these early influences was the socially challenging, yet sonically non-threatening sound of the 50s and 60s folk revival,

White guys got a hold of that stuff [Alan Lomax collections of 'Folk' music] and they said we can do this too but our guitars are made by Gibson and Harmony!  
You started having this folk music that was talking shit. You had lame kind of pop folk music people like Peter, Paul and Mary, which I happen to like and the

Kingston Trio. Even to us straight guys, and I was a straight guy back then, that was radical, that was like you were hip. It was intellectual at some level, it wasn't little Pretty Peggy March...it was Pete Seeger (Michael Davis 2005).

The artists that Davis speaks of here were sonically simple in terms of instruments and musical tools (like chord progressions) and instead utilized lyrics as the political delivery system. The band set itself in opposition to this softer sound in music. Yet, the notion of rebellion through musical forms was one that identified the band, even if it was not to be done lyrically. In essence, the band was more known for their sonic sense of anarchy, which came though in heavy use of distortion, pulsating rhythms and improvisation, called by members "High Energy" music. This sound was more important than the absence of political rhetoric on their three albums; *Kick Out the Jams*, *Back In the U.S.A.*, and *High Time*.

These early influences made sense in terms of the rise of dissent that Davis spoke of earlier. These children of the Detroit area heard the challenge to the status quo lifestyle in these supposedly "traditional" forms. From this folk revival came an icon to the band and, one could say to a generation, Bob Dylan. "Then he came along, Bob. Bob spoke to us like no one had ever spoken...he spoke for us. He sang these same songs, traditional songs, only the way he sang em...it was like he was there. Like you were there, like it was you singing it...because he couldn't sing!" recalls Davis (2005). Taking in the poignancy of Dylan's message and delivery Davis began to possess a broader perspective concerning the power and viability of music in uniting large and diverse audiences.

However, a more important influence on the MC5 was the British Invasion, a musical movement that looked to American R&B and blues performers for its sound. The MC5 had encountered the music of some of the artists that inspired the Invasion like Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Chuck Berry. Yet, groups like The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Who, and The Yardbirds furthered these influences on the band through their reinterpretation of these artists. According to Thompson, The Yardbirds were of special interest because “they were an experimental band” (Thompson 2005). This fascination with Yardbird’s-like experimentation was mentioned in some of the earliest press the MC5 received. In a February of 1967 feature in the *Detroit Free Press* “Teen Beat” column the group called it “the new music.” Kramer was quoted as stating that, “Now we are taking rock and roll further than it’s been taken before. We’re into playing sound as a method of expression.” The article later refers to the Yardbirds and The Who as “leading exponents of the new sound” (Alterman 3B).

For the MC5’s inspiration, Thompson indicates that the British Invasion was balanced by domestic talents: “from that point and time you could add James Brown, Otis Redding Wilson Pickett, and the Motown influence because we lived here in Detroit...so we had a lot of great music on the radio all of the time”(Thompson 2005). One can hear many borrowings on the band’s first album, *Kick Out the Jams*, where heavy guitar distortion meets pulsating rhythms, hype men, lasting grooves, shuffle rhythms and Rob Tyner’s pleading and emotive vocal delivery. As one can see here, music, like politics and social issues, was a mix of international, national and local forms. This combination of musical forms would be further complicated as the band established a relationship with

John Sinclair.

Because of numerous affiliations with publications like *The 5<sup>th</sup> Estate*, and *Downbeat Magazine*, Sinclair was known in the musical community as an authority on jazz in the Detroit area.<sup>iv</sup> Through the DAW and Sinclair's record collection, the MC5 was exposed to jazz that would provide new fuel for their musical fire. Such names as Archie Shepp, Pharaoh Sanders, Sun Ra and John Coltrane further diversified the bands' approach to music and to the potentiality of experimentation with dissonance, feedback and improvisation.

Soon through their association with Sinclair the band became regulars at Detroit's Grande Ballroom. Owned by a former schoolteacher, Russ Gibb, the Detroit music scene centered around the club for rock acts trying to find presence in a town that was dominated by Berry Gordy Jr.'s internationally celebrated Motown label. The MC5 would share the stage with nationally known acts like The Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company as well as up-and-coming local acts like Bob Seger, Iggy and the Stooges (from Ann Arbor) and Ted Nugent's Amboy Dukes. Thompson reflects,

We had a concept and that concept was called High Energy. We looked at it as music that had a lot of strength, music that had a depth of emotion, music that was powerful not just in terms of volume, but it was powerful emotionally and powerful dynamically. Once exposed to the free jazz movement, then we understood that sound itself was the palette (Thompson 2005).

This concept of "High Energy" music, Thompson states, was one that most of the groups playing the Grande were "keyed into." He attributes this feeling to the working class

realities of Detroit. (Thompson 2005). The scene eventually commanded some attention from the major record companies. The MC5 were some of the first names signed from this period, along with Iggy and the Stooges to major record labels. Numerous other performers like Alice Cooper, Ted Nugent, Bob Seger and The Rationals would all eventually find a national audience thanks to being part of the vibrant Detroit scene of the late 60s.

The popularity of these Detroit acts would challenge the dominance of the San Francisco and Los Angeles psychedelic scene of the same period. Acts like the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Santana and the Byrds had come to be major forces in popular music. Thompson sees that although possessing many similarities like the dependence on psychedelic drug use and anti-war activity, the scene was fundamentally different. He points out that the West Coast scene was heavily influenced by Timothy Leary's mantra of "Tune in, turn on, drop out" and pacifism to create an alternative way of life: "Mommy and daddy were paying their way through school while they were developing these ideas, this alternative reality" (2005).

The youth in the Detroit scene, due to economic realities faced a more immediate threat of forced conscription, due to their potential inability to pay for college and receive a deferment. As John Willis has found, more affluent men were able to obtain deferments during the Vietnam War (564). When comparing the annual per capita incomes of Detroit and San Francisco during this time period, we find that wages averaged minimally 10% higher in more wealthy areas like Berkeley and San Francisco proper, even including the lower income city of Oakland (U.S. Census). The MC5's

particular local context and gritty hostility made it problematic for companies trying to make the band an effective commodity, especially compared to San Francisco acts. For instance, the band was dropped after its first album by Elektra Records for “unprofessional conduct” when it used the company’s trademark on an ad that read “Fuck Hudson’s.” Hudson’s had refused to sell the album due to the profanities used in the song, “Kick Out the Jams Motherfuckers” (Holzman). Elektra found the band difficult to control and the WPP disheartening when viewed as more than a gimmick, a Midwestern oddity suited only to sell records through a generic sense of rebellion.

Such realities of geographical placement closely mirror the experience of the so-called “Prairie Radicals” in the New Left who represented a “broadening of SDS to include more students from working class backgrounds.” The economic reality of Midwestern labor and life, according to activist Robert Pardun, “gave us reason to hope that we could build a broad-based movement that would change America” (Pardun 2). Prairie radicals were offering another narrative of the anti-war movement and interpretation of the New Left that extended beyond the campuses of Columbia or Berkeley. Pardun identifies these “prairie radicals” as possessing a unique geographical and hence different ideological construction of America. Here, “no one read the *New York Times*” and “conformity was the norm” (113). A sense of moral outrage over racism and the Vietnam war pulled these individuals from their Midwestern sensibilities, a new stance that could alienate them from their community and family (113). This was also true for the MC5. As a product of the “Midwest,” the band also seemed an oddity in the larger scene of music and politics.



## **Understanding Social Location**

Michael Davis' comment that the MC5 was "a victim of circumstance and a product of a time that is unique" astutely points out the necessity of understanding the forces that shape cultural forms. It is within these forces that one can begin to understand voices that have an immense potential power in reaching audiences through their creations and providing a space to express social location and dislocation. The cultural force that has been most studied in relation to Detroit, Motown Records, can perhaps teach us a valuable lesson in terms of the rise of the Detroit rock scene of the late 1960s. Smith states, "Motown's relationship to the cultural politics of Detroit teaches that place matters-the productive social, cultural, economic, and political change emerges from distinct communities" (259). Especially because of the political history and the mythical past that has grown from their short career, the complex intersection between politics and popular culture must be understood in relation to the MC5. The realities of their lives in the Detroit area, their affiliation with Trans-Love Energies and The White Panther Party, and their engagement with national/international issues allow a glimpse into an entity that, as Davis states, "is its own entity now." Because the music and image of the band have survived nearly four decades, influencing acts as diverse as The Sex Pistols to Rage Against the Machine the process can be conflated and confusing.<sup>v</sup> The following chapters will demonstrate the historical influence of media frames that have reified the WPP and the MC5 as political radicals. The band members have expressed disappointment and frustration with the media and with repressive state apparatuses and the music industry that they see as overshadowing and marginalizing their musical

legacy.

The history of the band allows some contextual insight into a product of popular culture that still generates debate amongst fans, critics and even amongst band members themselves. Cultural creations cannot escape the cultures from which they were formed. To discern the legacy and influence of a band such as the MC5, a legacy now invested in by numerous generations of fans and musicians, is to in reality discover not a specific, linear history, but is to instead allow a forum for discussion of meaning and investment in a band musically and politically larger than the sum of its parts. Public memory has played a key role in the maintenance of this legacy. The MC5's past is rife with polysemic messages for its audiences and for band members themselves. This chapter has only laid the ground for understanding of the MC5's career and legacy within popular culture and within the political history of this country. This legacy will be further complicated and these use values exposed in the coming chapters.

### Chapter 3

#### **Motor City Burning: Rock and Rebellion in The WPP and the MC5**

In the late 1960s, the United States was a country in turmoil. The Vietnam War and the movement for civil rights had generated numerous voices of discontent against the status quo. This fight found its way onto the streets, as organizations like the Students for a Democratic Society and The Black Panthers advocated various programs for social change, some peaceful, some more direct. In Detroit, amidst race riots and startling discrepancies in wealth between those who worked in industry and those who owned it, came the rise of the White Panther Party and their official house band and propaganda machine to the masses, The MC5.

The WPP was a revolutionary organization that called for the complete dismantling of the forms of power and control in the United States, focusing its efforts through the power of popular culture and media. John Sinclair along with his wife Leni, members of the MC5 and other local revolutionary figures in Detroit and Ann Arbor, founded the organization to antagonize dominant U.S. culture and to generate social change. The *White Panther Statement*, which was issued by the fledgling group in November of 1968, states, “Our program is cultural revolution through a total assault on the culture, which makes us use every tool, every energy and any media we can get our collective hands on. We take our program with us everywhere we go and use any means necessary to expose people to it” (1968, 1). This musically led ambush of noise and rhetoric looked to exploit media forms, and situate the message of the Panthers into every home, primarily through the youth of the time.

The focus of the chapter will begin with the perspectives of organization leaders and members such as John Sinclair, Pun Plamondon and Leni Sinclair on the WPP and the MC5's role in the group. These organizational voices have been the de facto sources of interest in regards to the political life of the MC5 since the band began to garner notoriety. With a heavy focus in the popular press directed to John Sinclair, as *the* determinate political power, the voices of the band are often pushed to the margins by the press as secondary actors along for the ride. Perspectives of the band members themselves will be the focus of chapters following, demonstrating the falsity of these allocated roles. To understand how useable rebellion played into the image of the MC5, we need to hear from all the stakeholders involved in creating that image.

Rebellion and its ties to market success and audience engagement have become a gauge for authenticity and for understanding the possibilities of rock as an effective, socially subversive practice. Can music foster radicalism? Can music foster change? The MC5 represents a rich intersection of musical, political and social identities through which one can interrogate these questions. Here a group and an organization which sought an array of goals looked to rock's foundational myths of rebellion. The following conversations with John and Leni Sinclair provide perspective on an experiment that became too big for any of the individuals involved and which has often evoked emotionally charged disagreements over how and where music and politics intersect. From Jeff Hale's use of the WPP to understand "why some segments of the counterculture progressed from strictly non-political ideologies to positions of radical extremism" to John Strausbaugh's view of the MC5/WPP "as simply making the media

look and sound more cool, the better to market their products and their advertisers,” the perspectives on the band itself center on issues of purity (Hale 125; Strausbaugh 91).

The band garnered both affection and dismissal because of their association with the WPP, which stood as their connection to an authentic rebellion. While many bands communicate social and political messages through their music, the MC5 phenomenon was different in that there was, as Sinclair describes, “an extra vision” of helping fund TLE and WPP projects. This relationship would allow them to “explore the possibilities of subverting the music industry and using its resources against it” with their overall aim being to tear down the American capitalist state (Sinclair 2005).

Such interplay between the mass media and seditious groups in the 1960s and early 70s has been the focus of numerous scholars. Dissident groups like the WPP, Black Panther Party, SDS, and the Yippies were both exploiters and victims of media. The WPP, like SDS looked to the media as tools for promoting their ideas. They would soon learn that the media were something entirely beyond their control and in their eyes media would often compromise or sensationalize their efforts. The ways in which these groups were reduced into palatable media forms is of concern to media critics such as Todd Gitlin who sees a danger in such representations. This is because information, “must be timely, unambiguous, intense, predictable, culturally familiar-and preceded” (45). Hence, the intricacies of a group, movement or party are often left by the wayside: “Some of this framing can be attributed to traditional assumptions in news treatment: news concerns the *event*, not the underlying condition; the *person*, not the group; *conflict*, not consensus; the fact that ‘*advances the story*,’ not the one that explains it” (28). In the

case of the New Left, “media treatment helped polarize the society, mobilizing a repressive Right and a controlling administration against a caricatured New Left” (127). The difficulties encountered by SDS in terms of its relationship and dependence on the media are also featured prominently in other scholarly works that include Kirkpatrick Sales’s *SDS* and Jim Miller’s *Democracy is in the Streets*.

Other groups were susceptible to this misrepresentation including such prominent groups as the Black Panther Party. Jane Rhodes contends that these distortions not only come from above but also come from within. In the case of the Panthers, the Party:

consciously relied on the press for salience and visibility, and they carefully crafted visual and rhetorical material to be disseminated for public consumption.

The press shaped stories about the Black Panthers to fit the organization, practices, and constraints of media institutions and the ideologies of government and law enforcement (97).

Hence, all of these interests found some benefit in media exposure, which carried the risk of making them look less genuine. Rhodes explains that multiple usages of media created “contradictions of the national response to the Panthers’ self-representations” and three thematic frames that “dictated the coverage of the Black Panthers as the group moved from obscurity to national icons” (104). These frames were: fear of the Panthers, condemnation of the group, and the creation of celebrity for group leaders. As we will see, the WPP found themselves susceptible to these same three interpretations, including the elevation of John Sinclair to celebrity status as his legal woes continued.

Such media frames, according to Aniko Bodroghkozy, were present not only in

news media but also in television entertainment. Television shows of the time including *Dragnet* and *The Monkees* provided dual interpretations for audiences not sure what to make of terms like “counterculture” and “hippie.” Presentations of drug-crazed youth on shows like *Dragnet* pushed the idea that generational disconnect was beyond one’s command when drugs entered the picture. According to Bodroghkozy, “many shows labored to find ways to portray the flower children sympathetically. The extent to which representations of the hippie counterculture could be separated from mind-altering substances determined the degree of favor or approval attached to those representations” (86). The counterculture could either find itself feared, condemned, (this was especially the case on law and order programs) or in the case of the Monkees, heralded as celebrities (81 & 75).

The reductive practices of the media of which Gitlin complains helped to propel numerous individuals within these groups into celebrity status. Huey Newton, Stokeley Carmichael, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, and of course, John Sinclair, became celebrities through their own propaganda funneled through media attention. These individuals were often deconstructed and debated instead of the groups themselves by cultural critics and news organizations seeking to package complex political and cultural entities nightly into consumable frames for middle America. They were keys to fearing or celebrating the New Left. According to Gitlin, “The leaders elevated to celebrity were flamboyant, or knew how to impersonate flamboyance: they knew what the media would define as news, what rhetoric they would amplify” (153). For leaders of radical movements, McLuhan’s promise that the “Medium is the message,” meant they had a

powerful weapon at their disposal (Bodroghkozy 39). And according to Bodroghkozy the possibilities were especially ripe in two certain mediums; “For members of the counterculture, art films and rock music were the preeminent arenas of cultural consumption” (48).

Sinclair looked to rock as a part of the everyday lives of youth that could potentially get them excited and ready for drastic social change. He discusses the excitement he felt when encountering rock for the first time,

It was incredible! These dudes opened their mouths to sing and a whole new race of mutants leaped out dancing and screaming into the future, driving fast cars and drinking beer and bouncing half-naked in the back seats, getting ready to march through the 60's and soar into the 70's like nothing else had ever existed before (Sinclair 1972, 9).

He continues that the energy of this music shot out “through the radio into every corner of Amerika {common spelling in the related materials} to retribalize its children and transform them into something essentially and substantially *different from* the race which had brought them into the world” (9). Rock allowed for the liberating impulse to go forth into the masses. Music would also allow a bridge between popular culture and the political/social underground of Detroit/Ann Arbor.

What we must understand more than anything else is that our music and our culture constitute a political force that the cultural revolution is inseparable from the political revolution, and the revolutionary potential of our culture cannot possibly be fully realized as long as the capitalist social order continues to exist



(35).

Sinclair, the MC5 and associated groups saw no disconnect between cultural revolution and political life. In effect, the group and the community built around these ideals benefited communally from the spread of music like the MC5's in both monetary and culturally revolutionary ways.

Until this time Sinclair's writings and propaganda associated with the WPP have been the dominating celebrity voice in terms of the WPP. This study corrects the concerns of scholars like Gitlin and Rhodes in terms of essentializing reductions. John and Leni Sinclair, Pun Plamondon and band members in later chapters allow a multi-tiered conversation that unlocks the complexity of interactions and realities of the WPP. Addressing Rhodes's point that these groups took part in the framing themselves, these voices also provide insight into the WPP's propaganda and how they saw it determining their life in the media. The WPP and the MC5 were much more of an organic and communal undertaking made up on the spot than the media or many studies of the entities have let on. The collection of these voices fundamentally breaks down the continuing, essentialized visions that these frames have ensured.

### **Background**

This cultural base for their desired revolution and dependence on music as a focus makes sense in terms of the path that had been taken by individuals like Sinclair to this point, when one studies their beginnings, going through numerous stages before and after the WPP. Near Wayne State University, John and Leni Sinclair (along with others like jazz trumpeter Charles Moore) founded the Detroit Artists Workshop (DAW) functioning

as a commune for Detroit area artists from 1964 to 1966. The workshop became a multi-purpose organization: producing concerts, founding and maintaining a printing press, and displaying art (Simmons/Nelson 22-23). The collective released several manifestos calling not so much for a fevered revolution as for an utopian world based on the joy of creation. Sinclair wrote that, “The real revolution that is forthcoming will be a bloodless one...Armies of artists and students are invading slum neighborhoods...should the revolution succeed it will usher in a golden age of arts and letters” (English/Sinclair).

At this point, the group purposefully avoided becoming a politically charged revolutionary organization and instead was focused on artistic communication through music, poetry, art and other mediums, meant to create a space where members could live outside of the dominant culture. John Sinclair explains in my interview with him, “The Artist Workshop basically was trying to model ourselves on the Beatnik movement.” He continues, “The whole Artist Workshop thing was to try to find a place where we could live outside of this [the dominant culture]. Somewhere, where we could do what we wanted and no one would bother us.” He continues, “So we got our own place...there weren’t bars or social settings or any kind of thing where what we were doing was welcome in Detroit in ‘64. So we rented a house and put on our own concerts, readings and we had our own place...classes...all aimed at people who felt the way we did pretty much or wanted to feel that way” (Sinclair 2005).

The group was aiming to change themselves into an isolated artistic commune of sorts. Here in their rented space they were able to provide a place for local artists and others seeking an alternative to the industrial realities of Detroit. Although in *Grit, Noise*

*and Revolution*, David Carson explains that the authorities would continue an interest in Sinclair and his organizations that grew from these early days of the communal entity, due significantly to Sinclair's continued use and advocacy for marijuana usage (and later LSD) (Carson 109-14).

The collective would morph into what would be called the "Trans-Love Energies," (TLE) reflecting less the beatnik/jazz flavored inspiration of the DAW, and more the growing influence of rock and the rise of LSD use (Simmons/Nelson 25-26). Sinclair observed that the collective began to change when core members began to take acid: "Then we wanted to change the world. It wasn't enough to change it for ourselves. We wanted everyone to see that it could be very different." Sinclair continues, "So we got this kind of evangelical feel to turn people on to the idea of changing things and making it more beautiful and harmonious." (Sinclair 2005). Much of this initial energy was applied to the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans, a struggle that members of DAW could see on the streets of Detroit in everyday life, as well as in riots. Part of the change in the group was reflected in the growing importance of a local band whose brand of furiously loud and uproarious rock would allow a connecting point between the artistic aspirations of the group and the growing sense of radicalism within the organization that would lead to the formation of the WPP. Members of the MC5 began to spend time taking in the beatnik culture and aura of the Workshop. Within this phase of the community's development, the MC5 would find its revolutionary voice.

The TLE would be marked according to Leni Sinclair (who would also become official photographer for the band) by the increased presence and the eventual agreement

of John Sinclair to manage the MC5. TLE would continue on the heels of the DAW, publishing, encouraging art creation and exhibition, as well as organizing concerts and light shows. The Grande Ballroom became the hotbed of activity for the group, with the MC5 becoming the Grande's house band. Although starting as a local band covering R&B standards and early Rolling Stones songs, the MC5 became, through an increasing fascination with feedback and amplification, a band regarded for their inimitable brand of sonic distortion and energetic performances. As a central figure in the artistic community, Sinclair would be a valuable connection to the MC5 not only in his centrality within the organization but also as a voice in such publications of the time as the anarchistic *Fifth Estate*.

TLE's experience in Detroit in 1967 was shaped by the increased paranoia of a police state that had dealt with significant racial strife and riots. The group, because they defined themselves as subversive of the capitalist-centric social world around them, and because they openly advocated drug use, was a target for police torment. The Belle Isle "Love-In," an event organized by the collective highlighted this mounting tension between the community and authorities. Tensions spilled over between participants and the watchful eye of the local police. This resulted in a violent riot taking place involving a significant police force who according to guitarist Wayne Kramer, "galloped toward the running people and clubbed them like they were playing polo" (Carson 115-16). The Love-In, along with other, increasing police and municipal harassment—especially after the 1967 Riot—pushed TLE and the MC5 to move to nearby Ann Arbor. With the new location and the success of the MC5, the collective would reemerge as the White Panther

Party, with the MC5 acting as its sonic organizing force.

### **A Total Assault on Culture**

In November 1968 Sinclair and the Party released the *White Panther Manifesto*. Now this was a group seeking not only social change through art (as demonstrated by the MC5 as the organizing force of the group), but also through more aggressive and in-your-face notions of cultural and social revolution. Modeling themselves after the Black Panthers, the group sought complete freedom from the boundaries of 1960s American society. The United States in its life as an international superpower and bastion of capitalism was seen as a subsuming system that sought to hold its subjects within its clutches. The group advocated an all-encompassing program that would not only show itself on local stages, but also took on a more decisively public tone. The plan was now for an all-out rejection of every facet of the dominant society, as demonstrated in the *Manifesto*'s claim that "Our program of rock, dope and fucking in the streets is a program of total freedom for everyone. We are totally committed to carrying out our program. We breathe revolution." (Sinclair, 1968). The MC5 would be the group's greatest asset, as their increasing popularity garnered them national interest with a record contract and countless concert appearances.

The *Manifesto* contends that youth are the key to mobilizing social change. . Sinclair advocated that youth were the energizing bridge to the revolution he hoped for: "THESE KIDS ARE READY! They are ready to move but they don't know how, and all we do is show them that they can get away with it. BE FREE goddamn it, and fuck them old dudes, is what we tell them, and they can see that we mean it." (1). *The White*

*Panther Manifesto* states that the energy encompassed within the potentialities of rock n' roll and its audiences can tear down the machine:

ROCK music is the spearhead of our attack because it is so effective and so much fun. We have developed organic high-energy guerrilla bands who are infiltrating the popular culture and destroying millions of minds in the process. With our music and economic genius we plunder the unsuspecting straight world for money and the means to carry out our program, and revolutionize its children at the same time (Sinclair 1968).

The Panthers sought to exploit the system in this regard: they would create, promote, manage and develop artists like the MC5 to take their dreams of revolution to the masses. While working within the capitalist establishment, the group's main goal, according to Sinclair and some others, was to exploit that system until it could be overthrown.

Their plan for the development and outcome of the revolution was laid out in the accompanying *White Panther 10-Point Program*. Besides advocating for the complete support of the Black Panthers 10 Point Program, and the release of all prisoners in the United States, the White Panthers also sought the complete breakdown of the capitalistic system. The group sought to eliminate money, to open access to information media, dissolve all "unnatural boundaries," allow for free schooling for all, to end armies, to free the people from leaders and a continuous, "Total assault on the culture by any means necessary." (Sinclair 1968). In their openly dissident nature, these plans differed from those of the DAW or TLE, which sought broad social change through less aggressive approaches. Sinclair and the Party, especially in their admiration of the Black Panthers

(mostly because of their encounters with police forces) were looking for communal life in a completely different world. The group was now no longer content with their own small communities; they had come to see the world as a place demanding social change.

### **Come Together**

The interviews with both John and Leni Sinclair reveal that the group was less of an orchestrated plot, and more a collective creation that occurred between band members, John Sinclair and those involved in the DAW and TLE. Levels of ideology and commitment would vary greatly. The band was also no longer merely a musical vehicle meant to further a political message; instead, politics and music were woven into the very lives of TLE, the WPP, and the MC5. The MC5's early career through their first album should be seen as indicative of a complete life-style, in which politics and culture demanded equal attention because they were a part of everyday life for those participating in the various incarnations of the communes.

The MC5 was not a tool manipulated by the WPP and TLE, because the band and the community seem to have emerged together organically. Sinclair observes,

The WPP *was* the MC5, they weren't some kids conscripted into this evil scheme. It was them and their manager and their road manager, the roadies and other people who lived in the same communes. We came to this together. Rob Tyner [lead singer of the MC5] and I spent most of a year just being best friends and hanging around...ranting and raving, taking acid, smoking a lot of joints. He influenced me as I conversely influenced him. He was a brilliant kid! (Sinclair 2005).

The band proved to be the nucleus for TLE and the WPP. Their increasing success as a local, then regional, and then national act according to Leni Sinclair actually became the driving force of the transition into the WPP. The increasing success of the band regionally would lead them to their first national record deal with Elektra Records.

The MC5's first album, *Kick Out the Jams* (taken from the title of their most successful song as a band “Kick Out the Jams Motherfuckers”), reflected this artistic and revolutionary assault on culture. John Sinclair wrote the liner notes introducing the group to the nation. The record sleeve reads,

We are a lonely desperate people, pulled apart by the killer forces of capitalism and competition, and we need the music to hold us together. Separation is doom.

We are free men, and we demand a free music, a free high-energy source that will drive us wild into the streets of America yelling and screaming and tearing down everything that would keep people slaves (Sinclair 1969).

The music of the MC5, along with groups like Ann Arbor's Iggy and the Stooges, is cited by many critics as the building blocks for the rise of punk and heavy metal. The ferocious and amplified sound of the band was a call to order for Sinclair's vision for the Panthers. Besides the call to “Kick Out the Jams” (Sinclair would use this language in the White Panther Statement saying, “there is a generation of visionary maniac white motherfucker country dope fiend rock freaks who are ready to get down and kick out the jams-ALL THE JAMS-break everything loose and free everybody from their very real imaginary prisons”) the group sought numerous means to enact their program for change (Sinclair 1968, 1). Music and drugs would provide the impetus for the revolution; the rest would



naturally follow in the mind of Sinclair and some of the band members. The contract with Elektra offered the group a much larger potential for financial success, but also for realization of their political and cultural aims

The relationship between the label and the band appears to have been symbiotic. “They thought it was an act. It was an interesting thing and a lot of people liked it,” states Sinclair about the relationship to Elektra. No matter Elektra’s views towards the band, the WPP was able to further their goals through the contract with the band. “Our idea was that this gave us a bigger stage for what we were doing. We could be a popular band and still propagate our ideas about the ways things should be...anti-authoritarian, anti-government, anti-war, and pro-civil rights.” The contract with a national label was embraced because it could support the communes as well as further the music/message of the band.

My goal was to work within that format of a band and audience, records... The money earning part of it was important. I thought this is the way you support a revolutionary force people that put out underground papers, etc. We were a single economic unit in Trans-Love Energies, White Panthers Party, and the Rainbow People’s Party. We devised a format where everybody lived together and nobody had an individual economic identity (Sinclair 2005).

The message was not, in either John or Leni Sinclair’s eyes, something formalized. The music itself and the live shows were the message. Leni Sinclair claims, “With the MC5 they didn’t go out organizing people...they played music and organized when they channeled that energy” (2005). John Sinclair adds,

One thing we were trying to do was exacerbate the tensions between kids and the authorities. That was our main organizing tactic was to kick up the tensions between the youths and the authorities and parents. And it worked like a charm. There was no calculation. I mean calculation was sitting around a table like this with three or four other guys, smoking joints, 3 o'clock in the morning, laughing, talking about how fucked up everything is (Sinclair, 2005).

It was through the music that MC5 made their aims public. But the band for the most part did not sing of social revolution, instead focusing on “high-energy” rock as a means for harnessing the energy of the youth. Sinclair makes this very clear:

They don't have no songs Ho Chi Minh you got to win. They were about fucking, getting high; they were about playing high-energy music. All of that was outrageous...it wasn't like SDS! We didn't engage in debates with people from the other side. We just tried to get as many people as we could to come to our events and enjoy our presentation from our hearts with them from their hearts...really (2005).

The “jams” in essence were the force that could break down the initial impenetrable outer shell of the machine, which included societal apathy. The energy and ferocity of the MC5 demanded investment and vigor from their audience. Political philosophies or communicated manifesto-like programs of action are not addressed in most of the band's lyrics (which comment primarily on themes of sex and youthful rebellion), and instead are left to the propaganda machine put together by visuals, performance, and Sinclair's writings. Inherent in the audience's experience of the MC5 was the rejection of

mainstream social values, replaced by “fucking, getting high, and playing high-energy music.” The music of the MC5, rather than an overt lyrical barrage of ideologies, seems to rely more on the noise and the energy it produces to harness social upheaval. Leni Sinclair shared in her interview that,

There was an attempt on part of the band, and John and Pun Plamondon and the rest of us to try to harness this gathered energy. ...that kids wanted to do something. They wanted to implement ideas...but there had to be a vehicle. So the White Panthers tried to pull them together so that they could start organizing in their own communities to make things better. The whole thing was based on the The Black Panther Party model of organization (2005).

That model of organization was one in which local communities would organize their own people for programs of social change. The band, in lead-singer Rob Tyner’s view, harnessed this potential energy through a symbiotic relationship in which the band aroused and released energy from town to town. Tyner comments that the MC5’s stage show,

was a beautiful demonstration of the principles of high-energy performance: as the performer puts out more the energy level of the audience is raised and they give back more energy to the performers, who are moved into a higher energy level which is transmitted to the audience and sent back, etc., until everything is totally frenzied. This process makes changes in the people’s bodies that are molecular and cellular and which transform them irrevocably just as LSD or any other strong high-energy agents does (Qtd in Waksman 229).

This notion of the non-separation of the music and politics by some band members and WPP community members, especially in the sonic organizing potential to be “turned on” as Tyner describes above, parallels concisely the theoretical framework Jacques Attali describes in, *Noise*. Attali sees the potentiality for energy, and its organization tied to the life of music. In essence, music conducts and directs the chaos of noise in the world into ordered forms: “First, music-a channelizer of violence, a creator of differences, a sublimation of noise, an attribute of power-creates in festival and ritual an ordering of noises in the world” (Attali 23). Noise, in Attali’s mind, is the key to power in society in that one form of noise can subsume other forms. Attali explains, “Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power” (8). John Sinclair and the MC5 saw in their “extra vision,” that a band bridging the underground and the popular could be a massively powerful organizing force by harnessing potential audience energies for revolutionary purposes. By producing and ordering noise into a stimulating flashpoint, the potential violence in noise could be exhumed and ordered through the music of the MC5 and through the continued mythos of rock’s relationship to a sense of useable rebellion for artists, audiences and the industry, which depends on this mythos to sell it.

In *Instruments of Desire*, Steve Waksman examined the connection between the MC5 and Attali’s perspectives on noise. Waksman observes that the context of working class Detroit gave the band and those associated with it a unique perspective on the potentialities of noise that sought to subvert Fordist notions of standardization:

The production of a disorderly electronic noise in this context indicated a contradictory stance towards technology, a willful move to master the tools of standardization, which at the same moment threatened to drown out the human presence with the force of the machine. The repetitive sounds and lyrics in the Five's music signified the boredom and sameness of everyday life, but also counteracted this boredom by producing a disorientating noise that brought listeners to an ecstatic pitch (216).

But this combination of boredom and its ecstatic transcendence communicated through sound and lyrics is not the whole story. If one considers the MC5's creation of music both lyrically and instrumentally, the band in the context of the history of rock to this point was actively finding a voice in the public sphere of rock as a rebellious force. John Sinclair's comments on the band's interest in "fucking, getting high and playing high-energy music" was not too distant from archivist Michael Ochs earlier statement that, "If rock was the soundtrack to our lives, then these soundtrack albums had to encapsulate any of the teen topics of interest-automobiles, assorted fads, sexuality, rebellion, escape, energy, life, death, loneliness, dancing and dating" (Qtd. in Waksman, 10). The MC5 did this in a contextually new fashion. The same notions of basic rebellion and questioning through the power of music that came in early rock were alive and well in the MC5. The group took the initial energy of the rock music that the group and Sinclair had found so much worth in, and put it into a plan for social action.

This sonic dimension, based on amplification and distortion, meant that the band went further and further in seeking to realize Tyner's vision of music and response.

Waksman states that, “It was not technology as a thing itself, but technology in its capacity to generate noise that the MC5 found so full of possibilities” (232). By embracing technology (that is, developments in amplification, the electric guitar, electric bass, and so forth) and rock’s continuing, inherent rebellious ethos, the MC5 sought not only to create noise, but to use noise to reach for new possibilities in the world of music. Attali claims that the ordering of noise that occurs within music “has as its function the creation, legitimation, and maintenance of order” (Attali 30). He maintains that, “Its [music’s] fundamental functionality is to be pure order. Primordially, and not incidentally, music always serves to affirm that society is possible” (31).

To some extent this is both true and untrue when applied to the MC5. The use of noise through the channeling of music was a tool to harness energy to subvert existing systems. The guerrilla reputation of the band took rock to new levels of useable rebellion and encouraged hope for social change. Yet the group, and the WPP in their focus on their program of “rock, dope and fucking in the streets,” utilized the creation of noise, of music, of the rebellious nature of rock also as a promise that indeed a new “society was possible” as stated in Attali’s comment above. The society was one in which the creation of art, music, poetry, and communal living could challenge and ultimately take down in their eyes the capitalist, imperialist state of the United States of the time. As Attali hoped, some found the MC5 within a new level of musical composition that reclaimed music as a form of communal enjoyment and societal use. Here, “The listener is the operator. Composition, then, beyond the realm of music, calls into question the distinction between worker and consumer, between doing and destroying, a fundamental division of roles in

all societies in which usage is defined by a code: to compose is to take pleasure in the instruments, the tools of communication, in use-time and exchange-time as lived and no longer as stockpiled” (135). Music is then a mode of communication and commonality meant to be actively used and whose authorship rests with each individual and the use they make of it in everyday life. Such conceptions of organic purity when applied to the band were of course complicated though in the dependence of the band on its recording contract to spread the WPP message. Those investing such notions of purity into the band were to be quickly disappointed when political and revolutionary hopes for the band were not met.

### **Comparative Rebellion**

At this point, we should consider the socio-political dimensions of the MC5 in relation to other contemporary radical groups. After all, John Sinclair did not see the DAW, TLE, WPP, or later the Rainbow People’s Party as mirroring groups like the Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS. Rather, in *Guitar Army*, Sinclair postulates: “we are given to feel that in order to be ‘political’ we have to take part in demonstrations and rallies and confrontations with the established political system, that we have to make the choice between getting high and digging the music and getting down with each other on the one hand, and ‘taking part in the struggle’ on the other” He continues that,

we *are* making the revolution by living and carrying on the way we do, that our cultural revolution *is* and integral component of the worldwide struggle against imperialism, and that the way we can best contribute to the liberation struggles of other oppressed peoples is to deepen our commitment to our own alternative

culture, to develop that culture along its highest and purest lines, and to bring it consciously within the context of the political revolution of which it is naturally a part (Sinclair, 1972, 37).

Sinclair saw the actions of groups like the SDS or their more radical break-off group, the Weathermen, as merely reacting to what he called the prevailing “death culture.” By contrast, the idea of the WPP was to create, through the power of artistic communication and expression, and especially through the MC5, the energy for young people to create local communities that shared communal styles of living and that could effectively subvert the capitalist, imperialist worldview that Sinclair and others deplored. Again, this development of the WPP was based on models that the Black Panthers were practicing including the aim to establish numerous colonies across the nation that would be able to reach local populaces.<sup>vi</sup>

John Sinclair comments that in terms of what the Weathermen were doing (clandestinely bombing government buildings including the Pentagon), “We were sympathetic to anybody radical.” Yet, the violent approach was not something that the WPP thought would be as effective as organic community creation to combat the “death culture.” He points out that, “All the things that they were developing to embrace ideologically...we were already practicing. We were an affinity group, we were a commune, our lives were integrated with our thoughts...we had been to prison” (Sinclair 2005). Sinclair believed that there was no separation between practice and ideology. Instead of being caught commenting on or protesting (as SDS did) the “death culture” a complete practice was needed to allow for the continued growth of the revolutionary



movement. The ideological impetus for this cultural practice came primarily through music: “Tutti-Frutti by Little Richard, School Days by Chuck Berry, blues records, that was my first inspiration. That’s what inspired me to find a life out of white cultural America.” “It was young people making the records, so yeah, it was an expression of a zeitgeist.” He continues, “Everything I ever did is founded on that.” Sinclair also described his development of ideology also being closely tied to beat writers like Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Although in Sinclair’s view, Mao, Che, and Castro provided beacons for people to liberate themselves from oppression (Sinclair 2006), music was to remain central to his notions of social change and would continue to do so even after his eventual break with the MC5.

Sinclair in his interviews and Minister of Defense, Pun Plamondon in his autobiography pay homage to the Yippie movement as well.<sup>vii</sup> Like the Yippie movement, the White Panther Party would uphold a central reverence for spectacle and usage of the media as a tool of empowerment. Sinclair’s call to use, “every tool, every energy and every media we can get our collective hands on” (Sinclair 1968), bears a striking resemblance to Abbie Hoffman’s contention that “Advertisements for revolution are important in helping to educate and mold the milieu of people you wish to win over” (Hoffman 67). The ability to utilize media outlets as well as create alternative outlets became a central tenet of WPP life. Sinclair states that, “We were the same people!” Chicago convention...we’re down we’re there...we’re the Detroit chapter and that was a full ten months before we became the White Panther Party.” He continues, “See the differences between us was that we did things. We had a program in real life. They

[Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and other key Yippie figures] gave talks and speeches and symbolic gestures and actions. It was extremely valuable in advancing the movement, but it wasn't what we did. We didn't do protests...we didn't call press conferences. We didn't care about being on television; our world wasn't on television it was on the radio. We put out records and did dances. We could organize people to come out and not only make a statement and have a dance but also get some money to print some leaflets with to get people out of jail." (Sinclair 2006).

For Plamondon, individuals like Jerry Rubin and Hoffman were able to without formal appointment, "express the attitude and aspirations of millions of progressive young people." However, the lack of formal organization pushed Plamondon increasingly toward the community-focused actions of groups like the Black Panthers,

The YIPPIE! model had a certain attraction, but it also had its obvious drawbacks.

As a non-organization, it was difficult to organize anything practical or long lasting, like a food co-op or medical clinic or free music in the parks. It's 'members' were limited to calling for demonstrations, promoting pranks, and performing street theater—valuable activities, to be sure, but not enough to sustain a movement over the long haul (116).

For Plamondon, the Yippie penchant for media exploitation combined well with more solidly ideological boundaries in the writings of the Panthers as well as within texts by "Mao, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel, Nkrumah, and Fanon, as well as anything I could get my hands on regarding the American left" (120). The formalization of ideology and practice within the WPP and the influences being taken in would be an exacerbated

contention amongst community and band members. This debate was heightened as outside pressures and attention from governmental and music industry sources amounted.

Whatever the differences might have been in their approaches, the authorities looked to the WPP as a serious threat. John Sinclair and Pun Plamondon were targeted by police as subversive forces. Sinclair would eventually be sentenced to ten years in prison for the possession of two marijuana cigarettes (State of Michigan). This conviction was fought by Sinclair's cohorts, eventually leading to a "Free John Now" concert featuring such names as John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Bobby Seale, Jerry Rubin, Allen Ginsberg and others in Ann Arbor in 1972 (Simmons/Nelson 82). Sinclair was released three days after the event. The rise of the MC5 in Sinclair's mind was the main cause for his incarceration:

I went to prison, because basically I was manager of the MC5! That was what really cheesed me off! I was an underground figure. I was big in the underground, I wrote for the *Fifth Estate*, I was a poet...nobody knew anything about that in the outside world. Where we went with the MC5...we intersected with the popular world, because they were a rock band. That's where they operated, within the popular arena. That was what made me a notorious figure that they had to lock up (Sinclair 2005).

Although he had been locked up earlier for marijuana-related charges, Sinclair's later sentence was viewed by many as an excessive one, including to the Michigan Supreme Court who eventually overturned the conviction on its own motion.

Police and prosecutors also targeted Pun Plamondon. Leni Sinclair claims that

Plamondon was a “fall guy” for a bombing of a CIA office in Ann Arbor in October of 1969. Plamondon was also prey for being targeted for drug charges as well.

The government had a plan all along I think to use us as a testing grounds for the constitutional power grab by the Nixon administration. They thought we were universally reviled and that no one would come to our defense because we were not part of the new left. We were not like the people at the Chicago 8 trial, we were not lefty radicals and they thought people would just think, ‘Oh...their weirdoes and we wouldn’t have any support and they could get away with doing what they did...and it didn’t work. The same lawyers that defended the Chicago 8 also defended us! (2005).

Eventually, the WPP began arming itself, but said it was only for defensive purposes. Leni Sinclair explained: “As things got more overtly political, we also tried to follow the Black Panther Party example in self-defense. We figured if we were ever attacked by right-wingers or police...we should be able to exercise our Constitutional right and defend our homes and our families with legal guns” (2005). It seems as if this move was less preemptive and more a reaction to the changing nature of resistance in the United States as described by Plamondon in *Lost from the Ottawa*. He asserts, “With the recent beatings and arrests of antiwar demonstrators across the country, it was clear to me that the power structure would do whatever it took, including beating, arresting, and even killing its own children, to maintain the status quo” (115). He continues, “The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense seemed to be effective in organizing and instilling discipline in street toughs and ex-cons. Their platform called for black citizens to defend themselves with arms

against racist police acting in an unlawful manner” (115). In short, the WPP did assert its own right to armed self-defense, but weaponry does not seem to have played a central role for the organization.

### **The Last Jams to be Kicked**

Ultimately the band would dissociate itself from Sinclair and the Party, releasing two more albums that commercially failed, leading to the demise of the group in the early 70s. Pressure from authorities and a reputation gained for drawing unruly crowds and associated antics (obscene language, performances, etc.)<sup>viii</sup> that limited their ability to produce capital and reach an audience pushed the band into dropping all associations with Sinclair and the WPP. As promoters became fearful of booking them and labels feared doing business with them due to the WPP’s rhetoric and reputation, their political associations got in the way of being a rock band. Still, the notion of rebellion has stayed strong in the history of the MC5. This is true as well as for the groups that would find their voice partially through the work of the MC5, including the Sex Pistols, Fear, or Rage Against the Machine. Music like that of the MC5 provides insight into how music can act within rock as a space for the commodification of rebellion, as demonstrated in Elektra’s idea of the MC5 as a great gimmick (the band was criticized as this by many critics as well including Lester Bangs). But we also must recognize that implicit and often explicit in the band’s music and in related projects was the desire to subvert dominant power structures and to allow a public place for audiences to challenge the status quo in ideology and in sound. These groups represent a foundational ethos and promise for rock. They are texts for asserting identity through a common space of

rebellion.

This was the inherent promise that the band, Sinclair and members of the respective collectives found so much potential value in. Instead of picking up a weapon and/or fighting in the streets audiences could assume and follow a rebellious spirit often just for the price of a concert ticket, an album or a T-shirt. Band members could take part in this rebellious community as well if so desired. The seriousness of this commitment varied significantly among those involved. Whatever the case, totalizing statements that construe the experiment as inherently authentic or as a capitalist ruse miss a perspective on power and the potentiality of media that warrants further discussion and that can assist in understanding the relationship between music, social change, and potential political subversion.

Ultimately, music did not provide the impetus for revolution that some WPP community members sought. However, Sinclair's admiration for music's power and its potential to offer people a useable sense of rebellious space is alive and well today, not only in audiences but also in the industry that counts on this promise to sell. The MC5 and key organizers like John Sinclair, Leni Sinclair, and Pun Plamondon momentarily found and used the potential energies that they saw in rock, in their opinions an organically rebellious music. Rock has not left this reputation behind; it continues—in the industry, in artists, and in audiences—to allow subversion and/or commodification within its borders.

Organizational perspective and thought only demonstrate part of this experiment in power and in the inherent capabilities of useable rebellion and the potential for social

change in music in the case of the WPP. The individuals who would become the spearhead and (for some) unwilling organizers for the WPP were the band members of the MC5. It is the MC5 who would garner the most attention and funds for the ongoing WPP project. In essence the project was the band. The garnering of band member's perspectives hence, is required to understand the parameters and possibilities of power in the organization. Included should be an understanding of the fundamental social locations that these individuals would bring to the table and the visions they would have for their career as both a band and as a possible ideological force. Sinclair was far from alone in building the MC5 mythos and these voices demand attention when garnering a complete picture of the band's life and its relationship to the WPP.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Sonic Anarchy: The Making of the MC5**

Within the context of late 1960s Detroit a rock band found their musical style and ideological voice. A Motor City-based rock outfit, the MC5 exploded onto the national music scene after achieving regional and local success. Through individual band members' voices, we can better understand their intentions and their effect on collective memory not only in music, but also on political and social change. These perspectives counterbalance the views of Party leaders like Sinclair and Plamondon, which for individual members could be a blessing or a curse depending on the individual and the band's career timeline. The blessings came through increased attention to the band thanks to the media storm of often-revolutionary rhetoric that accompanied the band throughout their career with the WPP. This same attention also brought with it though critical reception in the music press and from an increasingly concerned police and federal forces.

This micro level of investigation into the MC5 is meant to discern what members intended in their call to a "total assault on culture" through their association with the Panthers. Therefore, it explores how rebellion as a theme and practice was used in the band's career. The interviews reveal multiple perspectives because of the popularity of the group at local and national levels and the emotional investment in the success of the band, resulting in disagreement in hindsight about the experience. However, as the second chapter demonstrated, the realities of Detroit helped to significantly shape these perspectives, framing them by the use-ability of rock and its role in expressing grievances



concerning race and class that had literally been taken to the streets. As local events like the Detroit riot made national news and intersected with larger concerns about a fractured and unequal society, it created the charged atmosphere that launched the MC5's career and helped make it the voice of their youth, time and place.

All in all, as the interviews reveal, the band and its manager, Sinclair, were not ready for the reaction that their creation solicited, especially from increasingly repressive government interests as well as critical reception from their perceived brethren in the New Left and in the music press. As Thompson notes, a public myth of the band was created through an interweaving of self-generated propaganda, dominant media frames, and musical style. Thanks to their continued influence on popular music, especially in punk and heavy metal, as well as occasional coverage of band in the popular music press, its vigor and the sound are still alive. Along with musical legacy, the question, “how far were they willing to go,” politically and culturally occupies a place of infamy amongst fans and critics, testing where fact and myth met in the political life of this band.

### **Perspectives on the White Panther Party and Its Intent**

As charting its social location in the last chapter revealed, the White Panther Party was a reaction of young Americans to the realities of life in Detroit, as well as to national concerns like the war in Vietnam and the rise of psychedelic drug use. Guitarist Wayne Kramer expresses the sense of frustration that led to the Panthers' formation. He points out though, that the organization did not have a coherent strategy for political change, even as it adopted the image of the revolutionist:

It was never thought through far enough to become say the Green Party...an actual

political entity in national and international politics. It was only intended to be a voice, an expression of these young people's frustration. It's a way to say Goddamn will someone listen to us? That's all we're asking is for someone to listen to us. You keep saying it and saying it and it falls on deaf ears. You're natural instinct is to raise the volume, raise the level of the rhetoric. Start talking about by any means necessary, start posing for pictures with guns in your hands. That will get their attention and it did! (Kramer 2005)

Rising from the Detroit Artists Workshop and Trans-Love Energies, the White Panther Party was a meeting of minds inside and outside of the band, namely singer Rob Tyner, Kramer and Sinclair. The frustration that Kramer speaks of is demonstrated in the White Panther Statement issued in 1968: "The white honkie culture that has been handed to us on a silver platter is meaningless to us! We don't want it! All we want is our freedom, and we know we can't be free until *everybody* is free! (Sinclair 1972, 104). A release put out by the Party a short time later expresses: "We are responding to the increased pressure of the power structure by building a dangerous power structure of our own!" The main crux of that attack was the MC5, who would "get the Panther message to the people" allowing them to "meet with militant brothers and sisters wherever we go. All Power to the People" (108)!

The embracing of media forms to spread this message drew a great deal of interest from fans, critics and the authorities. Advocating for the full support of the Black Panther 10-Point program and platform, and calling for a program of "rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets" made the group a serious force to be reckoned with (Sinclair

104). For Kramer and other members of the band the message held many possibilities, some more serious than others. As stated in all interviews, such thoughts emanated from life in Detroit and from the state of social and cultural strife at a national level. This consciousness was balanced with an unapologetic desire to become a popular rock band. Thompson states that this brew resulted in violent gestures that were mostly theater:

The notion of change, societal change and pushing them {the youth audience} into the fight...we didn't really want to push them into any kind of fight. What we became was a representational model of a group of people who were willing to fight, especially when there were photographs of us holding machine guns. That sent out a message to the establishment. Now we got these MC5 guys who we already don't like because of their obscenity, because of the crowds they were drawing, the anti-establishment hysteria that they did not know how to deal with. (Thompson 2005).

Critics of the band have, according its members, perhaps misunderstood their meaning and intention. In his review of their first album in a 1969 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Lester Bangs stated, "The difference here, the difference which will sell several hundred thousand copies of this album, is in the hype, the thick overlay of teenage revolution and total-energy-thing which conceals these scrap yard vistas of clichés and ugly noise" (Bangs 34). Even recently, a 2005 *Uncut* review complains, "Shorn of their political context, they sound like a third-rate pub band." In this review, a central concern exists with the band's political life and its ability to maintain it. Without it they are merely a commercial, middle of the road act (Uncut 148). The search and perhaps hope for a pure

product of rebellion, an ethos that would allow fans and critics to take part, seems intrinsically tied to these perspectives. Davis seems to concur that at least at first the desire to become a major force in rock was what propelled them, not any “political context:”

I thought we were out to show the world what we had. It was all about making a record and being a big time rock and roll band. By that time I didn't give a fuck who was running the government...that bullshit. I just wanted to be a star...to take our rightful place in the rock world. I wanted us to be a rock and roll band not a political party (Davis 2005).

Kramer agrees that fame and profit outweighed any political ideology as he came into his teenage years and early twenties. The band was not an organic creation of guns and revolution from the start,

The band as teenagers were fundamentally most interested in becoming a successful band, a popular band, to be stars. We looked at the kinds of thinking that John Sinclair brought to the table as a stepping-stone to our stardom. It wasn't for me personally until I had been polarized by outside events, police violence, the war in Vietnam things that touched me personally that I developed a personal stake in political action or rhetoric. Literally the plan was to win over Sinclair then we'll win over the hippies and then we will be big stars! It was all about stardom as the motivating force. It wasn't until as I said some point when events unfolded as members of a generation that I became personally politicized or radicalized. Then it became real for me...(Kramer 2005).

Like Sinclair's interviews in the third chapter, the interviews with band members, who were active agents in shaping the WPP, reflected a primarily musical focus that did not rise to the level of strict political conceptions. . Kramer states, "My introduction to the concept of revolution was cultural...it was through the music itself. It was visceral, it wasn't intellectual, it wasn't studied. It was a gut feeling, an intuitive sense that something was wrong. That something was out of kilter in America, in my country, in my neighborhood." He continues,

That questioning was really the source where everything started. Then I began to fill in the blanks when I could say geez, this war that we're involved in some country far away, in some culture that has nothing to do with me and my culture with my neighborhood and my city and my country...doesn't make sense to me (Kramer 2006).

The music allowed a place for like-minded individuals to come together. Davis, in reference to The Beatles and the Rolling Stones states,

First it was just a sound...it was just fucking-a that's great...wow...keep it in your head and go through your day with that tune...thinking of that tune and everything would be better. As soon as I found other people who were feeling that vibe, these were the people that I wanted to hang with because we were on the same plain (Davis 2006).

Part of this shared musical community building amongst those in the group was also the cultural and racial challenges issued by the modern jazz movement of artists like John

Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra and Pharoah Sanders. The band familiarized itself with these artists primarily through John Sinclair, a jazz aficionado and critic:

Ideologically speaking, I think we got more information from the music, and from the jazz music that we studied. The philosophy of the thinking of the jazz players was of freedom in music. You could change music; you could do whatever you wanted to if you used your imagination. I think that was the real message (Thompson 2006).

Kramer in an interview with *Uncut*, described the sonic nature of rebellion put forth in the group in this space of free musical expression, “The militancy and anger of the black Free Jazz movement was the same anger we felt. That was one of the levels that we connected to them, that they were pissed off about things, and were trying to find a new way to say it in music” (Hasted 83). Thompson continues that the intrinsic link between the enjoyment of rock and jazz was the promise of a collective energy, one that they would label as “High-Energy” music, an energy that could allow for youthful explosion of thought, emotion and hedonism, what we found in that music was energy. The MC5 were interested in drive. We got that from the drag strips, fast cars, acceleration. We got it from the Who. They understood what drive was all about” (2006).

The ideological formation of the band and the WPP reflected musical forms as well as other cultural fare such as beat poetry. Opposed to revolutionary models of the time provided by Castro or Ho Chi Minh, Davis views other models leading to an informal notion of dissent while growing up in the 50s and early 60s, “It was a really

hopeful time, the beatniks were happening, poets, Kerouac, Ginsberg were writing. There was this tremendous explosion of intellectualism. Whereas my parents' generation...the post war generation was 'I like Ike.' It was all very red white and blue and stupid. It didn't account that there were other cultures in the world." These models did not provide a direct revolutionary focus but instead allowed for a form for youthful rebellion, "We were just kind of coasting...going from day to day. When some stupid shit would come up and you would be looking at it...you would just be get that out of my way...that's how this all started" (Davis 2006).

For individuals like Kramer political consciousness was being shaped by a process of immersion that was affixed to their quest for fame. This consciousness developed as the five young men increasingly encountered discontent and upheaval on the streets of the late 60s Detroit and Ann Arbor, as well as through radically savvy minds surrounding them in the WPP. For the WPP, as in *The White Panther Statement*, the revolution was to be cultural, "Our program is cultural revolution through a total assault on the culture which makes use of every tool, every energy and every media we can get our collective hands on" (Sinclair, 103). Kramer in the process of the interview clarified that idea of a band being the revolution was a fallacy. The true power of a band like the MC5, whatever its motivations, was the very possibility of organizing and providing a place for dissent in society:

We've created a sense of community...there is a power to that...there is a place for that within the political movement, but it is not in my humble opinion the political movement. The political movement is one in which the French Revolution or the

American Revolution was an armed revolution of the government, was never the revolution we were talking about. We used those words and those symbols, but it was a representation of (Kramer 2005).

Thompson echoes these sentiments when he discusses how the band and the WPP have come to take on mythical proportions with some fans and critics waxing nostalgic about the meaning of the Sixties searching for meaning in the 1960s counterculture:

The myth grows because we embraced a lot of revolutionary ideas, and that is a good thing. The idea that you can be different, that you can wear colorful clothes, that you don't have to marry the first girl...court her for 6 months before you have sex, the fact that you could experiment with recreational drugs like pot and not be a killer. The fact that you can think differently than the establishment and the fact that there were thinkers where the thinking was maybe if we could all talk to each other, maybe we could up with some different solutions, maybe we could change the way that people think about life. I think that is the true power, the ongoing power of the MC5...its in the music, its in the three albums we created, its in the lyric...the feel of the band. It is propulsive, it's dynamic, it's different, and there are elements of risk. "Black to Comm," that's the platform for freedom...in that moment in time...where can we go, what can we do. That kind of philosophy is rebellious in nature because the status quo wants you to be a consumer, to go to work (Thompson 2005).

"Black to Comm" was a usual closer for the band where they would partake in a jazz-influenced improvisation. Thompson's comments exemplify the power and hegemony of



useable rebellion in rock and in this case within the context of free jazz. The rebellion and subversive behaviors that Thompson describes, although seemingly countering the status quo, find substantiation in the capitalist order where sex, escape and style are all things to be bought. Music fulfills both ends of the bargain in packaging this subversion into useable forms for audiences who seek escape and social location in the subversion and criticism of dominant forces, while the music successfully uses these very same systems to spread its message and sound.

The modern music industry, despite its hegemonic capability to reincorporate and sell the language of rebellion still offered the best path to express dissent for band members like Kramer and Rob Tyner. The need to justify their notion of High-Energy music came through continued interactions with authorities and the increasing polarization of political life around him. As Kramer explains, “After a while you want to back up your argument.” To accomplish this, he says, “we found a language and a vocabulary in the language of revolution, in the images of Che and fighting the oppressors and certainly the Black Panther Party. We saw in them, people who took this revolutionary language and at least what we knew then, were applying it and had the balls to carry guns and law books to confront the police of Oakland.” He adds, “We found it inspiring, and we also found it patriotic that democracy required you, if you thought your country was going in the wrong direction, to do something about it” (Kramer 2006).

Interviews with Davis and Thompson especially highlighted a disconnect in this thinking. For them there was a complete rejection of political models accepted by the New Left. Dennis Thompson for example, in our discussion of ideological construction

of the MC5 and WPP, quickly hoped to set the record straight on MC5 political legacy, “I didn’t read the “Red Book”...sorry people I did not read the ‘Red Book’” (Thompson 2006).

Bassist Michael Davis echoes that their actual revolutionary dedication was paltry at best when compared to the perceptions of them held by the authorities, including the federal government. Instead, all those directly involved freely admit that the WPP was only a small group of people frustrated with the system. Davis sees that the group got beyond its founders’ initially playful intent at a very early stage,

To me as one of the founders of the WPP, one of the people who were sitting around the table when the joints were going down and the WPP was founded, it was just a joke! It was one of our like lets goof on the audience things! This is just a cartoon! I didn’t realize we were trying to be like the Black Panthers. But then I kept sensing...like they would show film of Black Panthers in berets and Wayne was like yeah, yeah (Davis 2005)!

Davis states that he felt more along the lines of, “What, what? Okay, it looks cool...but you mean we have to do that? I don’t think so. It kept getting more crystallized into being something...something. I never thought it was anything more than tongue and cheek, absolutely” (Davis 2005).

An affiliation with more formal revolutionary models for Kramer left him with a sense of ambivalence. He insists, “I don’t regret anything and I don’t close the door on it either. I know we made mistakes.” Part of the WPP’s reaction to continued harassment by the police and FBI was a series of promotional shots showing the members of the

MC5 brandishing weapons. Kramer sees this as problematic: “The image of the gun was a mistake. The idea that we would use armed resistance was archaic” (Kramer 2006).

Those archaic sentiments were ones that the government found of special interest.

These shots reflected an increasing disconnect amongst the band members about the band’s meaning and role in “the revolution” out there. Interviews with John and Leni Sinclair highlighted encouragement of self-defense in a very Black Panther-esque sense through the amassing of some weapons in the group (John Sinclair, Leni Sinclair 2005). Davis, who already testifies to having a disconnect with the focus of the Panthers found the process a befuddling one, contributing to his distance from Panther rhetoric,

You’re not going to have an armed conflict unless you have an army. And you see that’s what they tried to make us do. All of the sudden there was thirty-odd-six and some M1- Carbines around the house...what’s that shit do? We would go out and target practice (laughs)...practice? I play guitar, when did I start playing a thirty-odd-six? (Davis 2005)

Thompson looked to the armament of the WPP, in retrospect, as an instance of confusion, “There was a point where we started brandishing guns...that was one of our tactical errors. We really didn’t want everyone to pick up a gun and shoot the police...that was never the intention” (2005). Kramer, who as stated previously, was elevating his awareness and political radicalism, points out that, “We were young, we were crazy. We went too far with some things, but they went too far first!” He adds that there was a lack in communication amongst some members at the time, which may have exacerbated any confusion of direction for the band, especially regarding their role in the

White Panther Party, “Today I know a lot more about how my colleagues feel today that they didn’t talk about back then” (Kramer 2005).

The brandishing of weapons in these promotional shots demonstrates a discrepancy in individual ideals and goals for the band. To return to the main focus of this chapter, the White Panther Party while potentially expressing a foundation for revolutionary thought and dissent was not the entity that critics have perhaps wanted to believe in such as *Bang Magazine*’s claim that the MC5 were “the one and only in-your-face, capital P political band” (*Bang* 2). Instead, the members of the band, whose political thought varied from passionately invested to intentionally distant from more formal rhetorics, could perhaps, find some middle ground in thinking that they did not feel they themselves would have to partake in an armed struggle. Though the rhetoric did increase as the band and the WPP faced an increasingly hostile police force both in their homes and at their performances (Loren, 20), direct, violent action was not something any member was willing to partake in.

### **Somewhere Between Chords and Discord: Ideologies as Separating Factors**

As one can begin to gather thus far, a pure ideological voice within the community of the MC5 or within the WPP cannot be discerned. It cannot be denied that contemporary focuses like the Black Power movement and the Vietnam War did actually affect all members of the organization in some way. The realities of Detroit and the nation were continuously shaping perspectives amongst the Party and the band. Detroit’s increased oppression of the band forced the collective to move to Ann Arbor to avoid future violence. The collective had been the target of arson, and became a target for

police harassment (Sinclair 1972, 44). The MC5 and the WPP's call to revolution reacting to these numerous pressures appears to be the area where contentions and views amongst those involved becomes problematic. Numerous contextual factors added to this confusion including: 1. the incarceration of Sinclair on a drug charge, 2. the increasing political and radical awareness by individuals like Kramer as well as with lead singer, Rob Tyner, and 3. the stepping up of authoritarian methods of control, including the Department of Defense, as well as local authorities, who as the band became more popular became more concerned with their rhetoric and actions.

John Sinclair, the band's manager and key player in the White Panther Party's development, was incarcerated on a 9 ½-10 year sentence for possession of two joints and was held without appeal bond for nearly 29 months (Loren 21). The harsh imprisonment was part of an extensive record for Sinclair in the preceding years concerning marijuana use. The band, that had ultimately found success through Sinclair's promotion had for some time leading up to the incarceration, felt themselves drifting from Sinclair and the community.

Thompson states that the initial success of the band who were signed to Elektra Records in May of 1969, was indeed an extension of the experiences encountered in Sinclair's Detroit based communes,

The message was inside the music. We were nurtured and nourished by Trans-Love Energies and John's people and their thought, intelligence and freethinking. That was the beneficial information we received from being with them. There was so much more than we must destroy what exists with a Godzilla like

mentality, we must smash it down and build it all over again. But it was the idea of alternative thinking (Thompson 2005).

Thompson continues, though, that as Sinclair faced jail time, a gap began to widen between the band and community members more focused on political upheaval,

When John went to jail...it was like well, this man had gotten us this far. His politics became more aggressive, and combative and he was going to jail, and we were not going to profess the politics...we're not going to jail. If it was our asses up against the wall and we were on the stand I think we might have escalated our politics even more so...but we didn't want to go to jail. We wanted to be free to make the music, make records, to tour and to be a rock and roll band. Ultimately the real design of the MC5 in the beginning was to be one of the best rock and roll bands in the world (Thompson 2005).

Kramer agrees that escalating tensions were occurring within the band due to factors like increased commercial success and repression from authorities at national and local levels, were heightened when combined with the harsh realities of Sinclair's forthcoming sentence:

John really believes in the power of art to change people, to enrich our lives...that is the basis for the things that John does and for the things he does with the MC5. When it became clear that the MC5 was an ongoing business concern and John's legal difficulties started to conflict, it reverberated in personal problems. It took form in resentment. I don't know if you know many people who have done time...but most people freak out before they get locked up. It is such a traumatic

thing to face and you want to blame somebody. And John blamed me, the MC5...but mostly me because he was really close to me and that's what we do, we lash out at the people closest to us (Kramer 2005).

The band and Sinclair by the time they were signed to Elektra Records in 1969 had suffered a long past of frustrations and torment by local and national authorities. Currently, one of the most intriguing evidences of this is in the footage of the band taken by the Department of Defense during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The Yippie festival was supposed to be held in Chicago's Lincoln Park while the Convention was meeting. The MC5 was the only band to show as tensions in Chicago had been nationally broadcast, dissuading others to participate. The performance and the band's national contract with Elektra Records pushed Sinclair into the limelight as a countercultural guru. Thompson thinks that the government had taken notice of the band as a catalyst of anti-authoritarian rhetoric and singled out Sinclair as its main target: "The idea was if we take this manager out of the equation, maybe this MC5 thing will go away. There was probably someone who said that sitting around at some backroom table" (Thompson 2005). One could certainly see this potentiality in the 10-year sentence leveled against Sinclair for his possession offense, representing an affirmation of Thompson's fears. Along with this targeting of Sinclair, the indictment of Pun Plamondon for his supposed role in a September 1968 bombing of an Ann Arbor CIA office reflects an established interest in the WPP by state and federal intelligence communities. This increasing interest in the New Left and groups associated with it targeted key individuals within these organizations that were seen as domestic threats to

national security.<sup>ix</sup>

The crisis of thought in regards to Sinclair and other Party members that Kramer discusses above could be witnessed in the increasingly militant rhetoric utilized by Sinclair in Party press releases. A May 1969 release states,

We will not allow these creeps to stomp us out, and we will defend ourselves by any means necessary against the fascist terror. This means using every possible weapon at our command, including the pig's own technology. We will rob that motherraper blind, we will steal his machinery, his media, his money, anything he lets us get our collective hands on we will snatch up and take back to our communities where it will be put to use for the people by the people with the people. All Power to the People! The spirit of the people coupled with the strength of the pig's technology in the hands of the people will enable us to turn the pig out of pasture for good (Sinclair 1972, 153)!

One can see a marked contrast to the program of "rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets" advocated at the inception of the Party. Sinclair, in his book, *Guitar Army*, looks at the WPP as being a reactionary force which was "struggling for survival" and that by stepping up the rhetoric was "getting so extreme that it began to turn them (the MC5) off too, along with the people we addressed ourselves to"(Sinclair 1972, 50). The group became reactionary, according to Sinclair, because no longer was the group providing a clear alternative to the "death culture," but was reduced to defensively keeping their head above water in the face of increasing authoritarian pressure. As Sinclair struggled for the survival of his freedom, the MC5 struggled for theirs. Feeling isolated and repressed by



local and national powers that be, and fearing that they too may become a target, caused the band to split from Sinclair. Kramer reflects,

We were struggling to find our way. John was really our mentor...he was the snowplow that cleared the way for us to be the MC5 and once he was out of the picture, we were in trouble. The more his legal problems increased the less he was available to us and we were really struggling and trying to find our own voice. What John was able to do was articulate things that we felt at a gut level. John was older than us; John was better educated than us. John had a clearer worldview than we did (Kramer 2005).

After the separation the band would make two more albums. The path was not an easy one for them. Davis states, "We dumped the commune and then officially now we were going to just be a rock and roll band. Then there was real hell to pay...because you jumped horses in midstream. The press, the fan base is saying hey, hey that's not cool! People are very eager to point out when you step over the line...and that was stepping over the line" (2005). The dropping of the White Panther affiliation, as garnered from the interviews seems to have been a means for surviving as a band, who still wanted to be a musical force. Thompson explains that the pressures were numerous, and facing the continued wrath of a government that as Attorney General John Mitchell stated, "was looking to gather intelligence information deemed necessary to protect the nation from attempts of domestic organizations to attack and subvert the existing structure of the Government." (Qtd. in Wilson), partially pushed them into a state of doubt and confusion.

He continues, "The band was finding itself, who we were. Don't forget all the

things that were happening to us at the same time. Losing John Sinclair, confusing our fan base a bit...from the 1<sup>st</sup> album to the second album...two different schools of music entirely.” He continues, “We were losing ourselves we were beat up. We were taking some pretty nasty drugs, and that is another large part of the reason that the band separated, because the drugs the band were taking were these death drugs” (Thompson 2005). The band had moved on from drugs like LSD and marijuana to heroin: a reflection of larger trends of the time especially in urban centers like Detroit. Two albums after their debut with Elektra drugs would become one of, if not the most prominent cause for the band’s demise.<sup>x</sup>

### **Reducing the Rocket: Making Sense of the MC5 and the White Panther Party**

The preceding pages have permitted a look into a relationship that allowed a plethora of uses of meaning and significance for those involved. If one were to ask if the relationship between the MC5 and the White Panther Party truly reflected a revolutionary group in the annals of American history, the answer would invariably differ based upon members’ perspectives. Time has taken away two of these voices in Rob Tyner and Fred “Sonic” Smith. This further complicates the spectrum. What can be discerned from the three remaining members is that the MC5 and the White Panthers was a group/organization that was built upon an array of perspectives, some seeing radicalism as tongue and cheek and some declaring its authenticity. These perspectives were complicated when the group amassed national media attention. This media attention allowed the five young men a massive audience through a national recording contract. Members, whether believing in the possibilities of change through cultural revolution or

whether basking in the limelight the band had collectively sought, saw that the MC5 and White Panther Party become an amorphous organization that could fulfill numerous potentialities. It also created numerous grounds for alienating the less politically motivated members of the band, exemplified by an increasingly apprehensive Thompson and Davis. The MC5 quickly became a creature of numerous interpretations by the band members themselves. Far from a cohesive unit, the group was an often-conflicted collection of views and intentions for what the MC5 was supposed to in popular culture and the political world.

The levels of communication and levels of loyalty to rock and/or to social upheaval allowed for this multiplicity of perspectives among band members, among Party members, and between the MC5 and WPP. The interviews conducted reveal a band somewhat divided. Rob Tyner and Wayne Kramer are commonly referred to as the most connected to Sinclair, and the potential social, cultural and political visions of the White Panthers as expressed in the Party's rhetoric. Davis points out that decisions regarding the WPP's marketing and its adaptation of increasingly formal political and revolutionary rhetoric was done through a filtering process that began to progressively more involve those excited by the reaction of political and cultural debate the band was drawing. "So our information kind of got filtered down through innuendos and jokes" (2005). Hence, it appears that an ineffective and incomplete form of communication occurred as the band stepped up its rhetoric and ran into greater repression from authorities. As determined by my series of interviews with the band and other WPP leaders, the breakdown is as follows: the determination of revolutionary rhetorics and image mostly centered around

Sinclair, Plamondon and Kramer; secondary to these initial discussions were Rob Tyner, and other WPP members like Leni Sinclair, Gary Grimshaw and Dave Sinclair; finally at the bottom of the rhetorical divide were those mostly concerned with the band's career, with little concern about their political role, including Thompson, Davis, and Fred Smith.

The Party was meant to create a sense of community for those persons that felt frustration in their daily lives. As Thompson notes, the revolution was not at the end of a gun barrel,

The basic revolution that was taking place to me was one of consciousness, one of thinking. I think the revolution that was going on was in people's personal lives and the way that they looked at the world. I think the effect that the MC5 may have had on people overtime was that yes you could kick out the jams in your own life, yes, you could do something different...you could be unique (Thompson 2005).

Kramer who is still active in political and socially focused causes retrospectively interprets the band's place in the counterculture and its sometimes de facto association with the New Left in a similar fashion,

We were sincere about what we did and it was expressed in the work we did. There is something keeping this whole thing alive. Why has the work of the MC5 been recognized by a generation today when we weren't even recognized in our own day? I think the message holds up pretty well. The fundamental message was that you could make a difference but you had to do it wholeheartedly. You have to make a commitment. You have to kick out the jams; it doesn't mean you

have to nudge out the jams.

He continues,

Will the MC5 be looked on as a cheap revolutionary hype rock band that a bunch of people were naive enough to swallow... I don't think so...I think the sincerity comes through. Given all that remember what we said in the beginning that the idea of a rock band being political is an illusion. It was in fact a marketed sense of revolution. We knew that then...this isn't a new revelation to me (Kramer 2005).

Kramer states that the use of Electra Records and the use of mass media was an intended one. It allowed the band to reach and influence a mass audience, carrying according to Thompson, a basic message, "...we're carrying a message a positive message a powerful message a message of self-efficacy that I think is a useful message" (Thompson 2005).

These perspectives have been developed and refined by the three individuals chronicled here for nearly four decades now. The MC5 lives above and beyond any single member's wishes or intents. Intent can only mean so much to a group that has carved a status in popular music and the social/cultural history of this country. Davis comments,

The legacy is cool, I'm grateful for it, I'm grateful for the fans and the people who have come out and like the stuff we did. So much of that is in spite of everything, in spite of yourself, in spite of all the mistakes, in spite of whatever you thought about it...that's what you meant. I have no control over the legacy, and I'm fine with that (Davis 2005).

Dennis Thompson acknowledges the concepts of purity and authenticity being

foundationally connected to the band especially in regards to their larger political/cultural legacy. This now nostalgic view of the band being an uncorrupted foot soldier for the counter cultural revolution is just as musically and generally constraining today as he felt it was for the band at the time,

It's an illusion...there is a lot of MC5 fanatics that would like us to remain pure; in other words, they would want to let the sleeping dog lie. That we were this entity at a certain point and time and they want to preserve it. They want to dip us in plasticine and say geez...you're not allowed to evolve (Thompson 2005).

He adds that for those that have invested a sense of authenticity in the band remain adamant even today as the band confronts ongoing debates on genuineness and intent, "People who are the fanatics...it's like whoa...You're stepping on their holy grail. This is the way I perceive it...you can't change my perceptions of it" (Thompson 2005)! Perhaps some of this dedication can be attributed to the fact that the MC5 and the White Panther Party really did, despite themselves, provide a useable text from which audiences could rebel and voice their dissent. Within the music of the MC5 and the work of the White Panther Party significant investment can come from audiences. This is because they allow an energetic and autonomous space for questioning society around them that could/can be obtained merely through coming to a show, wearing a t-shirt or putting on headphones. Kramer explains this momentous power to offer a space of dissent,

Each generation throughout history...one part of that youth is that desperate desire to figure out who I am...who the hell am I in the world. And one way I find it is in my music and when I find my music, that is my fucking music and you can't

take it from me and that's part of who I am" (Kramer 2005).

In effect a kind of authenticity is created for the listener. The power of the music is an outlet that feeds on this energy of change and challenge, wherever the boundaries may be. Indeed, it can be shaped by the bands and those controlling their images, but can also be a deeply personal experience where one can use/not use or buy into/ discard the messages of rebellion and angst put forth, whenever wanted. Somewhere between intended frames and successful poaching of musical products, the life of the music takes on a hybridity and malleability that fits numerous contexts. This notion of authenticity built into the music and life of the MC5 and the White Panther Party was not one relegated to their audience. The local and national authorities also questioned what exactly the Panthers could mean...to national security.

### **Messing with The American Ruse**

In retrospect the MC5 and the White Panther Party were not capable of creating a complete social revolution, nor did it seem that they had ever intended for there to be one in a physical way. Yet, the intensity of police and government attention was overwhelming to the group and to Sinclair. Their creation had fueled much more than the success of a band, and much more than an outlet of creative expression towards social ills. Davis comments,

We frightened the shit out of them. They didn't know how to deal with it. We recognized that we were cool, we know we're cool let's leave it at that. That's powerful shit. Because when you reach 10 year old or 12 olds kids and they just think you're the coolest and they want to be just like you...you don't think that

scares the government? That scared em...big. There weren't too many ROTC recruits coming out of that group (Davis 2005)!

One can see in CIA files of the time that this possibility of recruitment was especially frightening to the powers that be, who at the time, were actively investigating links between the group and a growing contingent of direct action components utilizing violence and terrorization including the Weather Underground and allegedly the WPP's own, Pun Plamondon.

As merchants of cool, Davis points to perhaps the most powerful effect of revolution through cultural standards. The power of media and its effect on culture afforded the MC5 a significant voice whose energy shadowed political clout to many a teenager: Theodore Adorno's worst dreams coming to fruition; dupes finding an identity for themselves created by the media. The media did not guarantee how that message was to be interpreted and how close it would match individual's perceptions within the group.

Here again, comparisons to the Yippie! movement can easily be drawn. Fiends of media manipulation, the WPP and Yippies put the power behind image and sound, blurring the line between Aronowitz's notions of a divided counterculture of the political and the cultural. Media did not allow for such a clear dividing line, and the WPP and the Yippies acted as sonic and semiotic tricksters, with the WPP merging the mischievousness of the Yippies street theater intimately with their musical output.<sup>xi</sup> Even though participating in the Festival of Life, and sharing a common view of media power, the band itself did not have formal ties to Yippie leaders like Hoffman and Rubin that Sinclair did. However, through Sinclair, the band felt the influence. Says Kramer,



“We all learned from each other. I thought that they were brilliant agit-prop political theatre artists. Wearing that American flag shirt...that’s why my guitars are painted in the American flag motif. We wanted to say we’re super patriots. You’re the one following the fascists. We’re for good old American justice” (2006). This sense of learning and camaraderie did not mean a formal relationship or formal methodology for change amongst the two. This was true due to the confusion that was apparent in the WPP as well as the basic reality that the Yippies lacked any real organization as a “Party” (Miller 285). Says Davis, “We understood what Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were up against. What they were dealing with was the repression of the political society that we rejected. That’s what they had to deal with within the boundaries because that was what the law was.” He continues, “I respected those guys, I related to them, I knew what they were going through. I knew it was tough, I knew they would have to stand up in court and people would laugh at them. They would have to do radical absurd things, make public statements that were going to fry them” (2006). Like the MC5, the cultural and the political delineations of Aronowitz’s notion of the counterculture were blurred by the Yippie approach, mixing the political and the cultural.

As the establishment increasingly targeted Hoffman and Rubin as subversive forces, some band members including Thompson did not feel the need to firmly align themselves with the targeted individuals,

What we had in common was the idea that change needed to take place. It was natural youthful rebellion. We wanted to end the war, legalize pot and have some sort of effect on bigotry and racism. Those themes we shared. But as far as

sitting down and having pow-wows with them...planning strategies...Na, I wasn't ever involved with that. Didn't care to be. Whenever the call came for us to show up somewhere [by the Yippies]...we went (2006).

Although called into the spectacle, all members of the band did not necessarily buy into the supposed ideological underpinnings of MC5's presence there. Davis confirms,

We knew what they were talking about, but did I want to be part of their court case? No. As far as going to Chicago, I don't remember ever having a relationship with those guys. I might have met them...we might have said hi, we might have passed a joint back and forth. But I didn't sit down and have a talk with them about what the new world would be like. Sinclair may have. He was really our connection with all of that. He kind of passed down his edicts to whoever was going to be the next link in the chain of puppetry (laughs) (2006).

Even though not formally aligning themselves with Hoffman, the two groups tested the power of media in creating real or perceived threats to the establishment through the exploitation of media. Opposed to the romantic vision of a master media manipulator put forth in the Abbie Hoffman biopic film, *Steal This Movie!* (2000), it seems that programs of media exploitation where on the spot experiments that were often fumbled by the WPP and the Yippies. Kramer explains, "In a sense we were all babes in media manipulation. We were figuring it out as we went. It's not like today where Karl Rove and the White House are geniuses at media manipulation. We were just making our bones" (2006). These rudimentary approaches to using the media as a stage for political theater and

personal expression soon placed many of these now celebrity figureheads involved in this manipulation, as targets of national security interest.

As was the case with the Yippies, Kramer and Thompson see the establishment as linking the White Panther Party, no matter how unprepared or unknowing they were of their own power in the realm of popular culture as well as within the increasingly contentious and violent movement of dissent and rebellion. Such claims that the band might now make in regard to delineations between culture and politics are not qualifications the government sought to understand the nuances of.

The threat was that their hypocrisies and inconsistencies were obvious. The MC5 was one small part of a generation that disagreed with the direction the country was going in that was directly affected by decisions that were made in Washington. He [Nixon] viewed the White Panthers and the MC5 along with the Yippies, and Black Panthers, and the Students for a Democratic Society and any one who stood up and said we don't want this war; we don't want what's happening in this country. You expand that out to the connection between the anti war movement and the civil rights movement...these were very powerful social movements (Kramer 2005).

Thompson explains that the very alignment of the White Panthers to these other groups created a reactionary response, which in turn propelled the band to higher levels of fame and myth. There was a want to stop the mediated and unfamiliar path the band was taking jumping between the popular and the political. "Because they wanted to stop this...this is where the purists might have a point, because of the way the establishment

reacted to us. All of it was running counter-posed to their ethic, a fundamentalist Christian ethic” (2005). More than Christian fundamentalism, the anti-communist paranoia of the time was probably more to blame in terms of isolating a foundational concern of the status quo. The reference to “fundamentalism” which as a movement found itself later, was in this context though of as a kind of Protestant ethos guiding the American mindset, but nonetheless is an important reminder that legacies are often read in contemporary terms. Overall though it is evident that the establishment’s reactions to the band only added to their popularity and to the myth Thompson speaks of.

Perhaps this is why the debate continues. The terms of debate regarding the band’s legacy is created in part by media’s framing abilities and the ability of individuals to use or discard the historically entrenched and institutionalized space of youthful rebellion within the practice of rock. A balance of sorts has come to rest at the feet of the MC5 as cultural icons. As stated on the back of their recent *Sonic Revolution* DVD, “The politics and drama that surround the group’s legacy may have enhanced their legend, but what really counts is the music they made” (Day/Kramer/Samways). In the end it is the music that does the talking, but what “really counts” is that the musical voice is combined with the sometimes harmonious and sometimes dissonant aura that follows the music as it reaches new generations. The music and the myth combine to create something unpiloted and uncontrolled by its authors.

Rather than a mass-mediated product that imposes a dominant frame, popular culture texts like the MC5 prove that audiences of all varieties (individuals, fans, critics, governments etc.) should be looked upon as active agents like those described by Kramer

who make the music and the potential sense of rebellion their own. Simon Frith offers that music "has been an important way in which we have learned to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, classbound, gendered subjects" (149). A significant practice that proves this logic is in the investments and use of the MC5 and the White Panther Party by audiences. These investments are drawn from audiences through numerous areas of the band's performance including: lyrics, stage presence, musicality, self-generated propaganda, and the media's presentation of the group. "How far would they go" in a revolution inspired by class, race and war, is a question that is not likely to find any coherent answer soon amongst audiences and fans. To provide only one dominant narrative would be to ignore the varied and sometimes disparate uses of the band by audiences and participants.

The ability of audiences to find significant investment in these areas of performance used by the band, allows for a multiplicity of uses for a wide array of stakeholders. Frith argues that in essence we come to find identity through music by possessing it, "In 'possessing' music, we make it part of our own identity and build it into our sense of ourselves" (143). This can create questions about intent and authenticity. Authenticity is, of course, problematic to gauge as the realities of music show a rooted-ness in, "the person, the auteur, the community or subculture that lies behind it" as well as a rooted-ness created by listener communities. Despite the fact that music in the 20th century and today is "a commercial form, music produced as a commodity, for a profit, distributed through mass media and culture" (Frith 136, 137), this is still the case. An

interplay of commercial, revolutionary and individual thought and culture coagulate in the MC5, conflating absolutes in terms of these questions of political and musical intent.

The final product beyond politics, beyond music, beyond the band's "high energy" approach is ubiquitous and seems to have etched a place in sonic, visual and written culture. They still effortlessly fit themselves into the formidable ethos of rebellion in rock through continued touring, DVD releases, album releases and in the press in such periodicals as *Mojo*, and *Uncut*. Simply put, the band garners further attention in the media and with audiences, because of its ability to demand fevered investment, disdain and debate regarding its validity in the political and social world as a musical act. Detroit/Ann Arbor scene brethren Iggy Pop of Iggy and the Stooges eloquently states this sentiment of fluidity, observing,

The MC5 went beyond having a sense of humor about themselves; they were a parody. They acted like black thugs with guitars. In Detroit, if you where a white kid, your dream was to be a black thug with a guitar and play like one...I can't say how political the MC5 are, but I certainly didn't feel it. But on a basic level, would they share their peanut butter with me? Yeah. So they were a decent bunch of guys-a nice bunch of guys to have around to blow up your local CIA recruiting office (Hasted 82).

## **Chapter 5**

### **Guns and Guitars: Revolutionary Style and Substance?**

The MC5 was the product of an aggressive synergistic marketing campaign by the WPP community that linked the group to the radical, musical, and political landscapes of the late 1960s and early 70s in both local and national contexts. This campaign, whether to the group's chagrin or not, has successfully framed the band for several decades, demonstrating the possibilities of performance and the place of useable rebellion in rock. Questions such as: "Is it possible to thrive or merely get by in the music industry and to still have a voice capable of dissent?" and "How authentic were their aims?" followed the group. Throughout the band's career and association with "the revolution," the audiences asking these questions, have had various investments in creating meaning through the band's performances. The programs of performance that made up this synergistic campaign propelled debate concerning music's role in social change.

Soon the MC5 represented, depending on one's investment in the numerous areas of performance, an all-too real threat to national security and "American values" or an elaborate ruse leading to questions regarding how divisive popular culture could become in the modern political and cultural world. Regardless of the intentions of the MC5 or those involved in the WPP community, the authors soon lost their intended frames, as the being morphed beyond a single, comprehensible whole.

Supporting a feasible postmodern perspective, preceding chapters have shown how critics, and even some group members like Dennis Thompson, saw the political

realities of the WPP as a “paper tiger,” as a non-functioning model. Yet, several hundred pages of documents from the FBI, CIA and other organizations including the Michigan State Police, are now available through the Freedom of Information Act,<sup>xii</sup> showing that the MC5 and their association with the WPP was taken quite seriously as a threat to national security and concerned names such as Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and J. Edgar Hoover. Beyond governmental interest, numerous music journalists, musicians and others took interest in the program of performance the band put together. From this, came a discussion of authenticity in regards to the group and its political associations, centering around the question of how far they were intending to go. Critics, the FBI and the views of those involved in the group make for strange bedfellows in the following pages, but all will be used as gauges to measure notions of dissent and rebellion.

Various parts of the synergized campaign of performance that elicited responses from Lester Bangs to Richard Nixon will be broken down in order to understand the role of these parts in the larger operation. The first aspect dissected will be the lyrical output of the group itself. The band’s three albums will be examined with a particular concentration on the first album, *Kick Out the Jams*. This focus is warranted, as the album is the only one actually representative of the band’s association with the WPP. The following two albums mark a deliberate attempt by the band to distance themselves from the political and cultural rhetoric of the WPP. The group’s output over the three albums demonstrates a wide range of lyrical foci involving sex, to drugs and surprisingly a relatively small amount of political content. Primarily the focus is on the pursuit of hedonistic desires and wants. These focuses actually successfully reflect the hedonistic



mantras of the WPP such “as rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets.” Yet, numerous examples of politically aware and possibly challenging lyrical messages do occur in such compositions as “The Human Being Lawnmower” and their cover of “Motor City Burning.” These messages, as will be demonstrated, do not however constitute what one would call thematically an overtly politically message or rhetoric.

The second area examined will be concentrated on live performance. This entails both the sonic make-up of the group and a focus on stage presence. Live performance consists of a combination of music, dance, and on-stage antics. Musically the band heavily fluctuated in their sound. A live, raw and loose aesthetic dominated their first album, *Kick Out the Jams*. The second album, *Back in the U.S.A.*, which was released after their break with the WPP, showcased a much more precise and meticulous band with most tracks barely reaching three minutes, reflecting much more traditional rock arrangements. The third album, *High Time*, finds a meeting of the first two albums, reclaiming a certain rawness in the compositions that is balanced by the musical discipline of the second album.

The band found their real success and fan base less through album sales, and garnered more attention in live venues especially in the greater Detroit and Ann Arbor scenes. The intrinsic importance of the band as a live act will be examined along with their sonic identity for this reason. The MC5’s stage show was a spectacle of not only music, but also choreographed dance, costumes, and numerous on-stage antics. The power of their live performances led Jac Holzman and Elektra Records to issue the band’s first album as a live album; this move was a risky and bold move in the record

industry at the time. Numerous negative run-ins with the law and promoters like Bill Graham also furthered the band's mythic existence as a live force to be reckoned with and sometimes feared.

The last and broadest topic area examined concerns the propaganda and press associated with the band and their association with the WPP. The WPP and Sinclair were behind an intricate network of live performances, photography, newspapers, flyers, art exhibits, poetry publications and readings, buttons, bumper stickers and numerous other means of creating and distributing the image and sound of the MC5 and White Panther initiatives. Here the home-cooked synergy orchestrated by Sinclair helped the MC5 create successful local and regional markets, with marginal commercial success to follow nationally/internationally. Hence, these sources are considered an important part of the larger program of performance. Here, just as within their lyrical content and live shows, specific roles were being played and presented by the band to audiences trying to make sense of what this was all supposed to mean. The propaganda and use of the MC5 as the financial core of raising funds for the WPP greatly aided in the aura of useable rebellion that the band commanded from fans and critics, as well as increasingly drawing attention from the authorities.

The life of the MC5 exists both inside the music as well as in ideological spaces outside of the music itself. This space between is demonstrative of the power and potential of popular culture as a means of expression and dissent. The program of performance that was amalgamated through lyrics, music, live performance, and propaganda contributed in creating a group that was loved, feared and ridiculed for their

experimentation with the useable space of rock in creating, or at least creating the image of, rebellion and revolution sonically incarnated. A single part cannot be held responsible for this mythos. Instead the MC5 myth has been dependent on these areas functioning together and through each other. All the while, considerations of authenticity and intent have stemmed from audience's reactions to performative roles the band put forth during their career.

### **Moon, Spoon, and Revolution? An Examination of Lyrical Content**

The first area of performance examined is one that seemingly should be of direct benefit to audiences in figuring out intent, lyrical content. For a group whose legacy often centers around questions of authenticity in regards to political subversion and rebellion, the lyrical content, the most immediate and obvious tool for a musician to communicate a specific ideological message, is primarily focused on the traditional conceptions of rebellion in rock. As cited by Ochs this is a concentration on, "teen topics of interest-automobiles, assorted fads, sexuality, rebellion, escape, energy, life, death, loneliness, dancing and dating" (Qtd. in Waksman, 10) and not on politically revolutionary thought or rhetoric. Lyrically, the MC5 explored notions of rebellion in much the same way as numerous predecessors in the rock canon. Isolated by itself, the lyrical content of the songs of the MC5 could easily be overlooked in concern to themes of revolution when considering other musical fare of the time such as "Street Fighting Man" or "Volunteers." The content at most offers a further obvious and potentially crasser push to hedonistic pleasures found in dating, sex and drug use...in other words, nothing revolutionary in the time of the band's career. These messages speak to a level of

useable rebellion, yet, not one that directly threatened the security of the nation or advocated for socialistic or communistic revolution.

Primarily, the band's first album, *Kick Out the Jams*, is filled with brooding and unapologetic sexuality. Vocalist Rob Tyner actively mimics an orgasmic climax indicative of this theme in "Come Together" describing a "Dance from which all dances come." The song ends with Tyner imitating the path to orgasm, describing to the audience, "Oh God, It's Getting Closer, Oh and When It Gets Closer/Oh God, It's So Close Now." If we had not been given a clear enough indication of intent, the band, when thanking the applauding audience as the song ends, beseeches, "We hope you all did...come together." Although potentially a message of brotherhood and community, the band unapologetically points us to a voice of sexual desire through lyrical forms. Throbbing machismo abounds as well in such tracks as "Rocket Reducer No. 62" where Tyner proudly gloats that "I'm a born ass pincher/And I don't give a damn." Numerous other tracks on the rest of the album and on the other two LPs echo these sentiments. A cover of "Tutti Frutti" opens *Back in the U.S.A.* and shares a teenage vision of sexuality that by the time of the release of the album seemed very unthreatening when compared to the music industry at the time, where best-selling groups like the Beatles were asking "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" The band quickly though re-establishes its swaggering tone on the track "Teenage Lust" where Tyner sings: "Surrounded by bitches who wouldn't give it in/Who thought that getting down was an unnatural sin/I'd whisper 'Baby, baby help me, you really must/I need a healthy outlet/For my teenage lust.'"

The lyrical content bends between the extreme and the flaccid throughout and into the next album, *High Time*. Songs from the last two albums demonstrate unashamed sexuality in tracks like “Call Me Animal” on *Back* or “Miss X” on *High Time*, which observes, “Heat gives way to sweat/My body’s soaking wet/We slide and slip/From hip to lip.” Also though, present in such tracks as “Let Me Try” is a fairly commercially digestible and traditional notion of sexuality in lyrical content present in the rise of rock and in the case of this track, specifically in the blues tradition that inspired it: “I’ll be your singer/You’ll be my song/I’ll lay you down softly/I’ll love you long.” This sentiment does not much more challenge the sexual mindset of the American public than individuals like Muddy Waters or Mick Jagger had done by the late 1960s.

A very real tradition of sexuality in lyrical form, both obvious and as metaphor was used and continued in the work of the MC5. One could easily make the case that lyrically, sex thematically dominated the MC5’s output. In regards to the band’s political life the theme does not speak directly to a more official and potentially more useable form of rebellion that could be upheld as a real threat to the nation by the government or to notions of dominant American values. When held up to other musical examples of the time, the subject matter of sexuality was old news. The second dominating theme of the group might be considered somewhat more so a threat, that of drug use. The topic of drug use, far from a rarity, is one that was dealt with commonly in music of the time.

The celebration and encouragement of drug use amongst Trans-Love Energies and The White Panther Party was far from a tightly guarded secret. Drug use was advocated within the basic platform of the WPP, was a focus of police interest directed at

John Sinclair and his marijuana advocacy, as well as was a focus of the MC5's lyrical content. The band places drugs as an integral influence on performance in "Kick Out the Jams" stating in the second verse, "Cause we all got in tune/When the dressing room got hazy now baby." The theme continues in "Rocket Reducer No. 62" declaring a dependency on chemical inspiration, "After some good tokes and a six pack/We can sock 'em out for you." Michael Davis shared that "Rocket Reducer No.62" is actually the name of a chemical solvent used to strip paint off of engine blocks. Several of the individuals involved in the group and the WPP community would soak rags in the solvent to get high (Davis 2005). Such overt references are less prominent in the latter two albums as general themes of youthful rebellion and sexuality became the focus.

A general sense of youthful rebellion, the useable theme so present in the rise of rock, is honored and heralded concretely throughout all three albums and through a teenage perspective. Embracing this youthful play, the band decrees, "I'm a born hell raiser/And I don't give a damn" on the first album, and then overtly pulls in a 50s teenage rock aesthetic on *Back in the U.S.A.* where "Tonight" and "High School" describe a world of teenage angst. "Tonight" posits the MC5 as the voice of youth yearning to escape the dullness of the classroom to get to the "rock and roll dance in town/And you know I just gotta hear that band play." Significantly mirroring this theme "High School" claims in regards to the "kids," "They only wanna shake it up/Dance to the rockin' bands/They only want a little excitement/They like to get a little outta hand." In the end a warning is issued that these wild *Blackboard Jungle*-esque youth will eventually take over and adults "better get out of the way." Again, the themes dominating the group's

work thus far, although sometimes crasser, still centrally posit Ochs' notions of teenage rebellion into the music.

Political themes did indeed make an appearance in the lyrics of the group, but in terms of considering direct political challenges in lyrical form, a general sense of youthful insurgency was much more present than any formal dissident plan for revolution. Vietnam is predominately the focus over the three albums if one is concerned with finding more politically overt messages within the lyrical output of the MC5. These messages are less pleas for direct action and are part of the general commentary in popular music of the time concerning the Vietnam War. Such messages could be found in numerous other groups such as Country Joe and the Fish, Credence Clearwater Revival, Jimi Hendrix, and even the Lovin' Spoonful.<sup>xiii</sup>

The anti-war theme is explored on the band's second album where Rob Tyner sings that after receiving a letter from the Army he decides that he does not want to take part, "It's not that I'm lazy/I'm just too crazy/To be goin' doin' thinks that way." One of the most overt commentaries on the War and the current state of American society on the same album comes in "The American Ruse" where society in 1969 is cited as being in "terminal stasis." The band rejects the America of their youth where, "They told you in school about freedom/But when you try to be free they never let ya" and is now facing the Army beckoning them to Vietnam as they become "hip to the American Ruse." Similar in sentiment on the album is the song "The Human Being Lawnmower" where the War is equated to a mindless death machine to which youth blindly submit themselves.

Such perspectives are continued on *High Time*, with numerous songs questioning the War and its contextual relationship to modern American life. “Gotta Keep Movin’,” “Poison,” and “Over and Over” discuss frustrations with Vietnam and American life. Here the band is taking part in the path of useable rebellion in rock that had evolved as social upheavals played themselves out on the battlefields of Vietnam and on the streets of cities and campuses across the nation. Music offered commentary and a place for audiences and consumers from which to vicariously or directly challenge social and political concerns of the time. Some of these messages offered a sense of empowerment without a clear path to tearing down the status quo. *High Time*’s most direct plea for social change and rebellion came in “Future/Now” where it is claimed that, “The future’s here right now if you’re willing to pay the cost/The power crazy leaders who control your very fate/They will steal your will...”

Yet such pleas, in terms of advocating rebellion to a new and useable level through the band, were not an overtly central focus of concern for governmental agencies that had looked to the band, the party and individuals like Sinclair and Plamondon as a possible extremist faction in the New Left. In terms of *Back in the U.S.A* and *High Time*, this was probably due to the fact that the band publicly split with Sinclair and the WPP. However, when formally associated with the WPP during the recording of *Kick Out the Jams*, the band’s lyrical content was the focus of some concern for those governmental agencies trying to understand the WPP and the musical organizing force that propelled them financially, the MC5.

Lyrical content however is largely ignored. As will be seen, most of the interest



generated in looking at the MC5 as a tool of extremism was based on tools of propaganda with very little interest paid to lyrical content outside of the band's use of profanity. For example a letter dated March 20, 1969 addressed to the President of the University of Michigan, the Justice Department, the FBI, and the Michigan District Attorney from a concerned "parent and taxpayer" was placed into the band's FBI file, a file that looks to have begun as early as 1967.<sup>xiv</sup> The author collected quotations from WPP propaganda in the hopes of providing some local insight to what they saw as a moral threat to the immediate community. The author, through a collection of these quotations, states that the letter was sent in the hopes that it would be possible to: "enforce the sedition laws against the White Panther Party" due to the complainer's view that the "moral tone of this trash" exists outside of first Amendment Rights ("Name Classified"). The writer of the letter then goes on to cite numerous pamphlets and rhetoric associated with the group as cause for this claim. Such examples are the standard within the intelligence gathered on the band and the WPP; lyrical content receives little attention in favor of Sinclair's fiery rhetoric.

Lyrical, the band did draw some attention for their performance of "Motor City is Burning" a song performed by John Lee Hooker in his career.<sup>xv</sup> An FBI memo dated February 25, 1969 describes a *Time* feature published on January 3<sup>rd</sup> of that year. It is quoted in the article that "The group also performed John Lee Hooker's "Motor City Is Burning," and there was no mistaking the message: 'All the cities will burn . . . You are the people who will build up the ashes.'" Concern about the article in the memo seems to center around the contention that "the MC5 are taking protest one step further to get

attention by practicing what they preach, as is shown by their string of arrests on charges of noisemaking, obscenity, and possession of marijuana” (SAC 25 Feb.1969). The article is used as an initial frame, from which the memo’s author is attempting to make general sense of the band. The same article that contained this information harvested by the FBI also stated that, “Just as clearly, even their most aggressive songs are only that—songs, not bricks or guns. It may be that the first victim of their metaphorical revolution will be the overused word revolution itself” (“The Revolutionary Hype” 1/3/69). Even with such words of leveled and perhaps condescending tones concerning the role of music in social change and development, state and national authorities would not take any chances. Interest in the band and the WPP grew into thinking of said entities being dangerous extremists. The effective synergy that helped to garner audience investments did not come from lyrics alone or even primarily in regards to the life of the MC5 and WPP. Along with lyrical content, performance would greatly add to the band’s reputation amongst fans, critics, and governmental authorities. Musical performance both in a sonic and theatrical sense also heavily assisted in creating the MC5 as either, depending one’s viewpoint, a face of the revolution, or a face of an unashamed marketing campaign drawing on the social and political upheaval of the world at the time.

### **Marshall Stacks and Norman Mailer: Musicality, Performance and the MC5**

This section combines perspectives on the sonic structure of the MC5’s sound along with a focus on live performance because the MC5 and the reactions they garnered from their fan base, from critics, and from authorities was primarily based on the band as a live entity. This was especially the case during their affiliation with John Sinclair and

the WPP where a close eye was kept on the band's performances by fans and federal authorities. Elektra Records risky decision to record the band live for their first album is indicative of this connection between music and live performance. The musicality and stage performance of the group can be considered the most immediate and lucrative means of creating a link, or the fallacy of a link, between music and social change. One can easily ascribe, as does Baudrillard that, "A myth of power-and a myth of origins: whatever it is that man lacks is invested in the object" to the group and their affiliation with the WPP. Essentially he contends, "it has become a sign" (82). Like Thompson's metaphor of a "paper tiger," critics like Lester Bangs see an empty signifier in the guise of a "revolutionary rock band." Or, contradicting such notions, as in the case of Norman Mailer, the music could be a revelatory experience; one that could indeed speak mountains about social change and development. The band's sonic construction and their dramatic live shows were the most immediate form of performance available to audiences that allowed them to gauge the validity of the band in relation to their supposed revolutionary objectives.

In 1968, while chronicling the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Norman Mailer came across the MC5 performing in Lincoln Park. The performance was one that Mailer spoke of as a revelatory sonic pronouncement of the counter culture and the potential energies contained within; an experience that shook the foundations of an elder generation whose ears had been raised on "Star Dust,"

he knew they were a generation which lived in the sound of destruction of all order as he had known it, and the worlds of other decomposition as well; there

was the sound of mountains crashing in this holocaust of the decibels, hears bursting literally bursting, as if this was the sound of death by explosion within, the drums of physiological climax when the mind was blown, and forces of the future, powerful, characterless, as insane and scalding as waves of lava (Mailer 142).

The author claims that he was, “as affected by the sound (as affected by the recognition of what nihilisms were calmly encountered in such a musical storm) as if he had heard it in a room at midnight with painted bodies and kaleidoscopic sights” (143). This same performance was filmed by the Department of Defense with perhaps as we will see a differing revelatory intent (Day/Kramer/Samways). Others such as Bill Graham and various promoters and venue owners could have cared less about ideological implications of the band’s performances good or bad and were much more concerned with the band’s reputation and penchant to involve local authorities. Showcased in the collected writings of manager John Sinclair, in his book *Guitar Army*, Sinclair through independent publications like the *Ann Arbor Sun*, describes numerous run-ins by the band with the law concerning noise, drug and obscenity violations. Perhaps the most notorious of these run-ins occurred at Graham’s Fillmore East where an anarchic group called The Motherfuckers demanded free entry. A brawl ensued and Graham’s nose was broken with a chain.<sup>xvi</sup>

How then is it possible that the MC5’s live shows could contain both the spirits of Woodstock and the dystopia of Altamont in one space? A great carnivalesque atmosphere ala Bakhtin was created in the MC5’s live environment that was hard to

predict. It may be what the band did, it may be the music the band played, or it could be what the band represented to those groups like the Motherfuckers who may have initially seen the band as the sonic vanguard of the revolution; regardless, some kind of investment by the audience took place. It seems to be a symbiotic relationship between all of those involved. As Davis shares,

To me our performances were about spectacle.... multimedia presentations that went into infinite possibility where anything could happen. In the back of my stoned consciousness there was some nirvana...that we would all just wind up some here and that everybody would be cool. It was a fantasy, but back then fantasy was a big part of my deal. We were stoned on weed and hash all of the time and taking this and that...anything we could get our hands on to expand our consciousness (2006).

This attempt to reach nirvana within the halls of concert venues and stages around the nation and the immediacy of exposure to the band and the WPP in these venues were also areas of concern for authorities, who kept up to date on the band's live schedule as much as any devoted fan. Whether or not this environment was an empty signifier seems moot as so many actively negotiated meanings were constructed within this space of identity and community.

The nirvana spoken of by Davis was not one that was loosely amalgamated but instead was focused on in creating this carnivalesque environment where the group, as well as the audience, were the intended targets. The concert space offered a useable and sometimes highly dramatized environment from which to escape everyday life, focused

through the band's concept of "high energy" performance. Musically this meant complete immersion in the music for the band and their audience. Kramer shares:

The performance and the spectacle...we called it high energy. We had a high-energy lifestyle, we had high-energy music, and we had high-energy performance. That peak energy...we were drawn to it and fed by it. When I would go to see another band and maybe one or two guys in the band were really deeply intensely doing what they were doing, I would connect with them more than the guy just going through the motions. It was a matter of passion and commitment. When we talked about that and incorporated that consciously into our performances and our music, we got that reaction back from our audience. We would win people over, we would convert them. We would make believers out of them! (2006)

This notion of "high-energy" music and performance is actually one of the only completely agreed upon ideals from the remaining band members garnered in this research on the MC5. "High-energy" music and performance is arguably *the* universalizing ideological connection that links all three remaining members across notions of politics, the music business, or the band's career path. Michael Davis asserts that this ingredient in creating the band's live sound and presence was intrinsic to the band's limited success nationally and internationally:

It's an attitude...it's a hard thing to define, to describe in words. It's almost as if you tap into a beam where everything you do is just focused. It doesn't mean you focus on anything; it's just focused period. When you play, the way that I interact with your drum part or guitar part...the way that my instrument sounds,

the band as a unified sound is intense...it's an intensity. You just can't kick back. It's condensed into the smallest strongest beam possible; it's all about strength. It's not about speed, fast or slow it's something you feel. It's kind of like loosing consciousness. I've heard it said that in the sex act the moment of orgasm is almost a loss of consciousness. It's almost a dream state. High energy...that is the closest thing that I can bring it to...it is that intense. It's sort of like living on the edge...going around that corner and not knowing if the tires are going to hold or not. It's like taking it to the edge of sanity (2006).

Davis continues, "We were in our early 20s at that point and we thought we could do damn near anything. Our point was to shock people...coming out of their suburban coma" (2006). Dennis Thompson agrees with Davis's assessment, adding, "We were brutally assaulting their senses. We did it with the sound, with the music" (2006). Such an assault led audiences to a wide array of reactions. Echoing Mailer's encouraging exposure, musicians such as Lemmy Kilmister from the group, Motorhead, to Jack White of the White Stripes and Raconteurs openly cite the musical influence of the band as central in their musical development (Jonze & Day).

Such musicality was not universally heralded. The band's musical legacy is still one debated amongst critics and fans. Lester Bang's review of their first album in a 1969 issue of *Rolling Stone*, describing the band as enveloped "in the hype, the thick overlay of teenage revolution and total-energy-thing which conceals these scrap yard vistas of clichés and ugly noise" (Bangs 34), mirroring similar discussions three decades later. A

2003 issue of *Bang Magazine* describes the group's first album with the following paradoxical treatment,

Politically correct it ain't; slick it is not. It couldn't be dumber or less grown-up.

It's a rushed, garbled rambling, patchy snapshot of an overhyped and under-rehearsed band who were totally off their ugly, white-afroed heads on tons of stupid drugs and the sheer power of their own ridiculous self-mythologising. And it was wonderful" (*Bang*).

The release of the MC5's box set, *Purity Accuracy* in 2005 solicited similar musical discussions. Nick Hasted in *Uncut Magazine* claimed the live CDs contained within were, "more grueling, as the band bravely attempt free jazz freak-outs with inadequate musical ammo" (123). In terms of authorities collecting intelligence on the band and the WPP, the sonic qualities of the group are not of interest, beyond the labeling of the group as a "'hard' or 'acid' rock group" as identified in a 1969 Secret Service report on John Sinclair that cited "Individuals involved in illegal bombing or illegal bomb-making," and "has been identified as member or participant in communist movement" as cause for intelligence gathering (Secret Service Report 19 September 1969). In regards to performance, local and federal authorities were much more concerned with the band's on-stage antics and the crowds that the band was capable of drawing.

Part of the synergenisitic selling of the band to the public, the media, and to the authorities who would label the group as an extremist threat, was the elaborate stage show presented by the band. The show incorporated music, dance, display, and White Panther rhetoric (concerts were a favorite spot to pass out literature and items



emblazoned with the WPP logo). John Sinclair in a letter written to *Creem Magazine* in 1970 wrote:

The stage show grew directly out of the music, all the dope we were smoking, and out of our culture and our collective history. As the music got more frantic the stage show got farther out, and the people responded wildly and it got more and more wild. It was a beautiful demonstration of the principles of high-energy performance: as the performer puts out more the energy level of the audience is raised and they give back more energy to the performers..." (Sinclair 11, "A Letter").

The presentation according to Kramer was based on several ingredients that included choreography, agit-prop theatre including once a faked assassination of Rob Tyner while on stage, hype-men, a fake religion, and costumes that went along with the musical presentation,

There is physicality to it...the performance the dance. I always admired performers that danced...interpreting what's happening with the music with your body. My idols of course are James Brown and Jackie Wilson and Tina Turner...people who really knew how to move on stage. Even ballet dancers, modern dancers, jazz dancers...you're trying to carry a message, you're trying to tell a story. So what is your media? Do you have paints, music, dance, theater? We were trying to incorporate as much of that into as we could. We used to talk about it in terms of "meat energy," put the meat energy into it! There would be that, the performance, the art, the science of the performance (2006).

Kramer asserts that the full intent of the shows were lost in favor of a reductive label of “revolutionary rock,”

It’s almost as if what ended up being transmitted about the MC5 was not really was what the MC5 was. We really did have a much broader artistic agenda. By the time it filtered down into ‘revolutionary rock’ it got reduced down into the simplest sound bite. We were trying to really open doors to all new stuff. The stuff Dennis told you about [a faked assassination of Rob Tyner while on stage]...bands didn’t do this kind of thing.... incorporating agit-prop street theater into the performance. I mean this predates Alice Cooper or any of the stage theatrics of today. We learned from the living theater...Julian Beck and their production of *Paradise Now* where the actors came out and said, “I’m not allowed to take my clothes off” and then they took their clothes off. “I’m not allowed to smoke marijuana” and then they smoked marijuana. To me this was real, this was intense! So we would actually sit in a room and brainstorm theatrical productions that would make some kind of social comment or statement...or just good entertainment value! But we would try to keep it to something that would have a larger meaning to it. Of course these stories are lost in the vapors, they were never documented, they were never filmed (2006).

Mirroring boundary pushing performances of other such controversial bands like the Doors, the band’s performances became a target of concern for authorities. Sgt. Clifford A. Murray represents what seems to be a general feel of moral panic when discussing the band’s ability to draw at live events that became a flashpoint of debauchery and rebellion.

He testified before a U.S. Senate Internal Securities Subcommittee in 1970 that, “I would like to say at this time that it is the opinion of myself and that of my department that the White Panther Party is working toward obtaining control of large masses of young people for the primary purpose of causing revolution in this country.” He continues, “The methods used to recruit these people is based upon a complete dropout of our society and the adoption of a system involving ‘rock music’ and the free use of drugs and sex” (Sinclair 1972, 31). The most immediate exposure to this feared communal environment was in the concert setting and the recruitment that could be done there.

One of the first recorded instances of intelligence concerning associated individuals involved the FBI’s noting of TLE as hosting the 1967 Detroit Belle Isle “Love-In,” “which ended up in a ‘rock-heaving’ and ‘bottle-tossing’ riot.” This information was included in a report on the activities of John Sinclair up to that time (Hoover Re:). Whether the subject is really the band or the crowd assembled and the potential behaviors enacted or what responsibility the band has in this process is a balance in intelligence gathering that is given further consideration in numerous documents. A FBI memorandum dated February 25, 1969, focused on the band’s feature in *Time* to gather general information on the group, highlighting that, “The article states that the MC5 now favor outrageous on stage stunts as removing their clothes and burning the United States flag” (SAC 25 Feb.1969). By the time of this memorandum the band had already been filmed by the Department of Defense during their Lincoln Park concert in Chicago. Indeed, the band had a lengthy relationship with authorities especially centering on marijuana violations/arrests, the use of profanity, and nakedness on stage

and the desecration of the American flag during live performance. Sinclair proudly advertised these run-ins inside periodicals including the *Fifth Estate* and the *Ann Arbor Sun*.<sup>xvii</sup> Fred Goodman in *The Mansion on a Hill*, describes an evening's occurrences opening for Cream where they had burned an American flag on stage,

the show climaxed with Tyner ripping a plastic flag to shreds and then hoisting a 4x5-foot banner inscribed with a marijuana leaf and the word FREEK. To put just the right finish on the spectacle, a member of the lighting crew walked onstage naked and settled cross-legged at the lip of the stage, where he chanted "Om" as the final chord of the band's ear shattering performance faded into an electric hum (163).

Focusing on the band's drawing power amongst the countercultural community, a Michigan State Police Inter-Office Correspondence memo, in one of the more entertaining acts of intelligence gathering, states that the MC5 are set "to play the Student Union at MSU [Michigan State University] on Saturday November 2, 1968. This should draw all the hippies from all the counties around the Lansing area" (Schave). What this meant, beyond a generic threat, was not explored in the brief memo. It seems as if the warning of hippies gathering was enough to merit concern from the police.

The ability of the MC5 to draw concertgoers to their various shows above all was looked to as a cash cow for WPP activity and the actions of associated names such as John Sinclair and Pun Plamondon. Confidential Michigan State Police reports through 1970 cited the: "great bulk of the financial support for the Y.I.P. [Youth International Party]-W.P.P. originally came from John Sinclair's percentage of the MC-5 earned in his

capacity as manager” (Murray). In actuality more than Sinclair’s percentage was used to fund the WPP, which did not, according to interviews collected, maintain a formal relationship with the Yippies. The band functioned as the primary source of financial production for the project. Authorities had by this time looked on the abilities and limitations of the group’s earning potential in other intelligence sources. Another Michigan State Police memo looked positively onto the incident with Bill Graham and the Motherfuckers that resulted in a blacklisting of the band in a large community of concert venues. “As of recent weeks, the MC-5 has run into problems because of the adverse effect of the White Panther activities and the publicity and because of this numerous appearances have been cancelled which results in a financial problem” (“Memo to Captain Walter Hawkins”). Both of these reports looked to gather a wide array of information on all facets of the WPP and the MC5’s role in the group, focusing on finance, membership, location, as well as on associated publications.

The reputation of the band garnered through a look at lyrical, musical and performance contexts are ones though that would have had little significance without the fevered use of media forms by Sinclair and the WPP. Instead, as heard on the *Kick Out the Jams* album, the band was surrounded by masterful town criers. Brother JC Crawford’s pleading to “see some revolution” and asking the crowd whether they are part of the problem or part of the solution provides some of the most memorable propaganda associated with the band.<sup>xviii</sup> Although not all members of the group agreed on any stated political content, they all believed an individual like Crawford to be a valuable addition to the group, acting as an effective hype-man for the band’s shows. The same would not be

the case for all of the associated propaganda and rhetoric put out by the WPP. A network of photos, underground press and other media became a focus of surveillance and concern as well for those seeing the band as cementing rebellion through music to a much too useable level. Group members saw this as both adding to the success of the group and eventually leading to its downfall. Reactions garnered from the national press also aided in a feeling of claustrophobia by the band and a general sense of greater authoritarian oppression by the industry and the government.

### **Watching Us, Watching You: The Press and the Framing of the MC5**

The importance of the press and its framing of the MC5 as well as the WPP's own propagated messages reflect a central framing process in the creation and usability of the MC5's mythical past by numerous audiences. These press pieces would play an intricate function in creating the notion and implications of "revolutionary rock" and the band's aura of useable rebellion. This usability entails not only fan and critical response and usage, but also includes the reaction of the government and the surveillance that resulted. Print media proved an especially useful tool not only to the group and the White Panthers in trying to define and spread their message, but also allowed convenient frames for authorities and the public at large to understand lyrical messages and performances of the band and the supposed intent with which they were created. Conveniently, these press sources became both a tool of performance that the band depended on where the myth and interest in the band was allowed to grow, as well as being a tool used by audiences to help determine meaning and intent.

As Todd Gitlin discusses in *The Whole World is Watching*, the mass media seeks to, “*process* social opposition, to control its image and to diffuse it at the same time, to absorb what can be absorbed into the dominant structure of definitions and images and to push the rest to the margins of social life” (5). This absorption and disposing of information into useable forms also seems to apply to federal surveillance methods, based upon state and federal documents, which utilized media frames to establish basic perspectives concerning the actions of the MC5 and White Panther Party. The use again of the article, “The Revolutionary Hype” in a January 1969 issue of *Time* by the FBI to frame their investigations points to accessibility of media framing and utilizes the article to describe the make-up of the group for an interested party, in this case the FBI. This is the case as well in detailing the extent of increasing attention for the group in national media outlets. The report references the band being featured in a “well-known widely circulated weekly” (SAC 25 Feb.1969). FBI files concerning John Sinclair specifically and the actions of the band and the WPP also cite news sources such as the *Detroit News* in the gathering of their information (“Secret Service Report”). FBI files also showcase an interest in other media outlets of the time that featured information on the MC5 including Barry Kramer, Editor of *Crème Magazine*, who was investigated as a possible accessory to the actions of the WPP and MC5 (“Memorandum to Director”). One can probably assume as well that other early publications like *Rolling Stone* and the *Village Voice* featuring the group could have been used for similar purposes, but with the great deal of blacked-out materials and destruction of some documents, these can not be pinned down for sure. The practice of using these media outlets does set a precedent for formal

or informal usage in intelligence gathering, including the utilization by the Michigan State Police of *Detroit Free Press* sources in their investigation of the MC5's role in the Belle Isle Love-In in 1967 or as the report referred to it as an "Assembly of Hippies" ("Detroit Police"). Much like the public at large, it seems based on the use of these sources that the United States intelligence community did depend on press reports and frames to establish understandings of the MC5 and its association with the White Panther Party.

The use of press sources is part of intelligence gathering and the use of these sources in reference to the MC5 and the WPP should not be considered exceptional. What should be considered exceptional, especially in regards to the New Left and groups lumped into them, is that the media played an increasingly central role in determining meaning and reach to even potentially repressive state apparatuses such as the government and the military. This created as Gitlin calls it, an active "notion of hegemony" where the press naturalizes complex entities into useable frames for the public, the authorities and even perhaps members of the group themselves (10). Major media outlets were actively trying to either dismiss or embrace the themes of rebellion put forth by groups like the White Panthers, SDS, the Weather Underground, and the Black Panthers. These frames can actively shape the political and social world and the ways these groups are received. Dennis "Machine Gun" Thompson sees these media frames as intrinsically shaping the reception of the band to the public at large:

The MC5 got tagged by the media as the vanguard of the revolution. Speaking for myself that is not what I wanted to do. Once they gave us this political tag, it



made it tough for us. We were a threat. We were more of a perceived threat.

Like someone can get tried for murder in the media. It's how fast things are compressed in this modern day world. The MC5 was guilty (2006).

Yet, isolating one entity like major press as *the* reason for the creation of the MC5's lasting relationship to the audience's discussions of rebellion, authenticity and music and social change would be ignoring a major and conflating perspective on media capabilities that the White Panthers excelled at, the creation of their own press and propaganda. This contributed to creating a level of useable rebellion in audiences including to the governmental interest that considered them a legitimate threat.

Thompson along with other group members openly testifies to the importance of this media onslaught and its responsibility in the creation of a revolutionary rock mythos.

Thompson explains, "The perception of what we were was manufactured by ourselves to a slight degree. For a while we had swollen heads...we thought we were going to change the world. That was youthful naivety" (2006). The program Thompson speaks of was the already discussed intricate network of flyers, newspapers, photographs and other propaganda that was utilized in obtaining funds for the band and the associated White Panther Party. These materials often were intended to exacerbate and highlight tensions between the group and authorities. Run-ins with the law and other "heroic" feats were chronicled by manager John Sinclair in a network of periodicals including:

*Guerrilla*, *Hard Times*, *The Fifth Estate*, *The Ann Arbor Argus* as well as newspapers created by the WPP themselves including *Sun/Dance*, the "national organ of the White Panther Party" (Sinclair 1972; 60). Michael Davis places a central importance on

frames such as Sinclair's "Rock and Roll Dope" series in the *The 5<sup>th</sup> Estate* in creating further media attention, "First, any kind of government intervention into what we were doing or our performances was always viewed as positive! It was just like that famous picture of the girl [*sic*] sticking the daisy in the National Guard Guy's rifle barrel.<sup>xix</sup> How do you fight that? It's an insurmountable argument...checkmate!" He continues, "I always thought anything the government did to repress us was good publicity for us and not just for us but for what we were wanted to do" (2006). Guitarist Wayne Kramer sees this independent and sometimes self-generated media as responsible for later mass generated frames,

I don't have the sense that we got a lot of play out of mainstream media. Most of the work we accomplished was in the underground press, through our own media. The underground press was an entire syndicate of newspapers in every city in America and around the world, and it was called UPS, the Underground Press Syndicate. It was pretty well organized. These were young entrepreneurs who saw that there was a need for a cultural voice as an alternative to Walter Cronkite and the *New York Times*. That's where we found our exposure (2006).

He also shares that, much like the debate concerning authenticity and intent that continues today across audience lines, the band's aims were even then sharply debated outside of their own self-generated press, "We would get hammered pretty hard from the left, because they would question how we could be revolutionaries and charge money for gigs. These were kind of tough questions for us in those days. I wasn't that well versed to articulate our position, John was better suited" (2006). The writings of Sinclair in

these publications and in WPP literature answering to the charges of the New Left and to dominant American society, compared to lyrical content or performance, are some of the most direct and outspoken ideological pieces to the MC5 puzzle. These were pieces that some of those involved felt invested in and helped shape, such as Kramer and Rob Tyner. Some like Michael Davis felt increasing pressure from the propaganda created,

It started getting away from my ideal of being a rock and roll band. The images I thought were more important at the time were being the tough guy, the Rolling Stones, or performance artists like The Who...things that I thought were more critical for us. They were more important to me than standing on stage and saying, "these guys are no good and these guys are no good." I got really tongue-tied. Am I saying the right thing here? Maybe this is counter-revolutionary? Maybe I'm offending somebody...maybe offending these guys? Listen...I'll just keep my mouth shut.

He continues,

I know that I would like to see society agree on what a real life is...I felt like that we were heading in that direction and then all of a sudden I felt compression...then I felt...better watch your step now...it wasn't freedom anymore. It was from within...it was with us really! (2006).

The writings produced by Sinclair and other WPP officials such as the following example from "Rock & Roll Dope #5," highlighted altercations, which defiantly challenged police and governmental concern, in this case over a dispute over pay and obscenities in the band's performance at a local Michigan venue,

Fred leaped into the pile of pigs who were beating on me, but two of them pulled him off and beat his ass with clubs. They subdued both of us, got us handcuffed and dragged us over into the corner before they started clearing the room. A bunch of sisters, righteous MC5 addicts who came to all our gigs, came over and started wiping the blood off of us, but the pigs grabbed them and pushed them down the stairs” (Sinclair 92).

Such self-generated press, along with more prevalent works like Sinclair’s liner notes which reached an international audience on the band’s first album stated that the band was a “free high energy source that will drive us wild into the streets of America yelling and screaming and tearing down everything that would keep people slaves.” These liner notes were eventually pulled by Elektra who feared the rhetoric and strong language might push record buyers away. Such sentiments aside from framing the group to numerous audiences including: the media, underground press, fans, and to critics, were also of central concern for the FBI and Michigan State Police. This certainly could have contributed to the heightened interest in the band and the WPP which created the “compression” Davis complained about.

FBI and Michigan State Police records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act indicate a concerned focus on group propaganda. FBI correlation reports as late as 1975 showcase a focus on media outlets created by Sinclair and affiliated parties including the WPP where themes of drug use, dependency on rock to spread ideological messages, and personal defense were highlighted ("FBI Correlation"). A FBI memorandum directed to the agency’s director dated 4/24/69 examines the *Sun* in

detail and its potential readership especially in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area. The *Sun* was of central focus due to its nature as *the* central publication of the White Panther Party, including being the publisher of the “White Panther Statement”. The paper is tracked down in the file to an Ann Arbor residential address. The report states,

The paper is cut on a stencil and is being run off on a duplicator owned by the MC 5, a rock band headquartered at 1510 Hill, and managed by Sinclair. Sources further advised that the paper is made available to high school students from the Detroit Metropolitan area at 1510-Hill, Ann Arbor and they are encouraged to take the paper to their respective high schools for distribution to their friends.

The report also links the papers funding to the earnings garnered by the MC5 with more investigations promised to determine “further information regarding the financial, editorial, and extent of domestic or foreign influence regarding the captioned paper” (SAC Detroit April 1969).

The following month a “security investigation” was launched in response to the above memorandum stating that Sinclair, as the founder of the WPP and his “professed anarchist beliefs” demanded additional investigation. Further investigation would include government surveillance such as wiretaps on individuals like Sinclair and Plamondon even after the MC5’s departure from the WPP (Memorandum to J.B. Adams). Further reference to WPP produced literature is mentioned in numerous other FBI documents including a letter from September 25, 1970 addressed to then Minority Leader, Gerald R. Ford Jr. from J. Edgar Hoover that discusses the WPP and pamphlets produced by the group. The letter was produced as a follow-up to Ford’s “inquiry

concerning the White Panther Party which you raised during our conference with the President on September 22, 1970” (Hoover). Even though the band had disassociated itself from the WPP that same summer, the band’s influence is still visible in Hoover’s discussion of rock as a spearhead of their attack. The letter from Hoover focuses on Sinclair and Plamondon as the main targets of investigation, but is heavily dependent on information from when the band and Sinclair were involved, to draw Ford a biographical sketch and a promise for continued active investigation. Thompson sees that as the rhetoric became more heated, certain messages heightened the feeling of threat taken on by local and federal authorities, especially the publication of a series of photos taken by photographer Leni Sinclair, where the group was brandishing both musical instruments and guns. “There was a point where we started to do PR pictures with us holding guns. That’s when I think they started really taking us seriously” (2006). Mirroring this alarm by the government concerning greater levels of direct action, or representations there of, Sinclair and Plamondon would also become a focus of investigation concerning a bombing of an Ann Arbor CIA office.

Much like Gitlin points out in *The Whole World is Watching*, the MC5 and its relationship to the White Panther Party indicate a complex and multi-layered process of making news events as well as dealing with larger media frames that attempt to package these occurrences. It is an active process of hegemony where an entity like the WPP tries to construct itself but is also held to dominant interpretation by media frames. Along the way, the WPP and the MC5 discovered it difficult to manage the power of the media frames they constructed themselves and how they were interpreted through the

national press and by the government. As stated in interviews before, those involved in the MC5 did not want to be a formal political entity and a political movement. Its members did not want to pick up guns for aggressive actions. Due to their own publications and their reception in the mass media, the message became more uncontrollable for any one individual to manage especially since the band and Party were by no means unified in their own vision. Says Davis,

The people were looking to us for answers and we were just one part of it...the performance part. There were other people like political prisoners and political activists of the day who were in the spotlight. Then there were those who were the invisible guys...the terrorists really. The underground people that were setting up booby traps and would actually go out and do something about it. The population at large was receiving many messages and not really knowing what the big blob was going to do. That's the thing with a mass of people. Nobody really wants to stand out and be apart...there are some that like the attention. But the majority of people are looking at each other before they do anything. It turns into those kinds of forces. Well our side was kind of fragmented. You had the MC5, which wasn't just 5 people but all these people in the MC5 organization who were pushing for what they think is right. You've got John Sinclair, Pun Plamondon, the women, the political guys, guys setting off homemade bombs. What does the blob think? You don't know, they don't know. They're looking to you for door number 1, 2 or 3. We had a problem finding the door!

He adds,

It grew and grew until it didn't have any more room to grow. And the things that were growing next to it...everything got squeezed. The message got, I think got corrupted, polluted. We had too many inputs...we didn't function as a unit of five anymore, we were a unit of who knows how many (2006)?

The use of press and media forms along with other factors like performance and lyrical content create a larger picture from which the MC5 revolutionary mythos was created and received by numerous audiences. An active synergy was created across these numerous areas that lead to the continued debate that the MC5 generates concerning intent and the potential role of music in political and social change. As Baudrillard contends, there is a distinct possibility for such an object dependent upon popular culture to create and maintain meaning to become merely an empty sign invested in by those desperate for some kind of frame to find a creature of style over one of substance. Articles written as late as 2003 like "Have the MC5 Sold Out?" or "Fever to Sell" desperately seek to find levels of authenticity and intent in the numerous areas of performance discussed above. The record of lyrics, music and propaganda left by the MC5 are still actively deconstructed and debated in order to determine if they indeed are a hollow shell selling records under the guise of social revolution; nothing new from the very same questions asked at the advent of their career.<sup>xx</sup> Audiences continue to receive the relatively small amount of texts left behind by the band in often disparate and contradictory ways.

However, one needs to balance perspectives of revolutionary facades, with the very real uses of the band by numerous audiences including; fans, critics, and individuals



involved in the WPP and the government itself as a useable revolutionary text. Genuine usage was created through this popular culture product and was applied to notions of revolution and social change. A fake facade would not make sense to those who made very real investments into the career and life of the MC5 and the White Panther Party and should be included in the discussion as much as those concerned with the 5's potential exploitation and use of revolutionary models. Here J. Edgar Hoover and Lester Bangs meet from beyond in a discussion concerning the power and possibility of popular music and popular culture in general to affect the political and social world. The band's ability to mix these areas of lyrical content, performance and media usage created an entity that lives and breathes on its own as the years have progressed. Somewhere between a farce and a concretely useable tool from which individuals could create rhetoric and a path to rebellion, the band continues to be a focus of discussion concerning the interactions of how popular culture can or has contributed to social change and development.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Up Against the Wall: Music's Place in Revolution**

The rise and fall of the MC5 pushed into an intensely debatable realm, the interaction of rock and rebellion. The band allows a concretely applicable case study concerning the realities of music's role in social change and development. One can spend chapters and careers waxing nostalgic about artists, relating them to notions of generational and cultural change without specific correlation. The MC5 takes these real and impassioned notions of music's role in social change to task, interrogating the realities and the shortcomings of culture's function in dissidence and rebellion. If one finds oneself as the Jefferson Airplane stated, "Up Against the Wall Motherfucker," the MC5 acts as a gauge in the history of popular music and popular culture to help measure how much music is capable of tearing down those walls of ideology and practice.

As a band that pushed, through its association with the White Panther Party, the foundational ethos of useable rebellion in rock, the preceding chapters have shown the complexities and passionate feelings that are engaged when a product of popular culture connects itself to political and ideological thought in everyday American life. The challenges or at least the appearance of challenges to these structures through musical forms actively brings out an ardent discussion concerning audience investment, intent and the realities of popular culture's role in determining the ways in which we interact with the world around us.

The career and life of the MC5 and its connection to the WPP showcases the interaction of media frames, audience, artist, management, Party, and critic's use of

popular culture texts. This is showcased as well in the use or repression of these texts by governmental sources that, as the last chapter proves, took an active interest in the MC5 as a possible mass-mediated tool creating counter-cultural ideology. As a product dependent on mass culture, numerous frames and perspectives on the band from outside and from within were actively used to make sense of a popular culture text that employed rock's tradition of youthful rebellion and actively connected it to a platform that challenged the realities of everyday life in the United States in the late 1960s.

The case of the MC5 proved that culture could be the flashpoint, or at least a promissory note, for social change. However, by no means does this guarantee specific actions or usages by individuals and groups, if any at all. Like the government, the economy, structures of law, or moral codes, music is a way that we as individuals order and understand the world around us. It is both a space for escape as well as for challenging our beliefs and practices. Christopher Small refers to the process as "musicking," a process of communication that is a basic function of our humanity. Hence, Stanley Aronowitz's contention that two countercultures existed, a political and a cultural, is a false absolute line in the sand. The MC5's reception in popular culture and within the realities of governmental and political life in the 60s demonstrates how these lines easily blur.

The following pages will examine discussions regarding music's role in social change and development as well as will utilize the MC5 as a specific and challenging text from which to measure these discussions. No promise exists here to create a unifying, holistic, theoretical perspective on the function of music in social change and in dissent.

The realities of individual intent, group intent, media frames, reception, and the role of technology are too interwoven. To promise an overarching theory would be merely an easily destructible ruse. To universalize would be to miss the spectrum of uses and meanings that are consumed and utilized by audiences. What can be guaranteed though is that the life of the MC5 allows for a more concrete notion of how much music can be connected to notions of dissent, rebellion, revolution and social change. The nature of their career tested these boundaries and helped showcase the challenges and triumphs of music as ideological tool.

### **Can You Dance to Ideology? Breaking Down the Boundaries Between Mind and Body**

Aronowitz's contention that two countercultures existed: a political, concerned with institutional change and a cultural, "for whom the erotic revolution was a political movement" which "believed the struggle within the state and its institutions hopeless and beside the point" (36) is a common separation that occurs in numerous narratives seeking to understand historical movements like the counterculture, neatly placing logic to one side and emotion to another. Music has traditionally been seen in historical discourse as part of this cultural sphere and viewed at best as a rejection or escape from the realities of the political and social world. Adorno and his cohorts in the Frankfurt School might call these notions of mass cultural expression as meaningless distractions from the realities of everyday life.

This separation between culture and politics is not one that is relegated only to the mass media, actually extending to the foundational voices of Western thought. Carson

Holloway in *All Shook Up: Music, Passion and Politics* extends this discussion beyond the realities of music in mass media to a rich history amongst heralded thinkers of Western civilization. He contends, “The debate over music is, in essence, a debate over the place of reason and passion in human nature, their proper relationship to each other in the soul, and the proper relationship of both to politics.” Classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, “asserting the primacy of reason, seek to use music to calm the passions with a view to the noble rule of reason in the soul and the city,” whereas latter critics of modernity such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, “accepting the priority of passion but also seeing a need to reinvigorate it, resurrect the power of music, aiming to use it to inflame the passions and silence reason in the service of a new, more noble politics” (20). Musical practice in society seems to be consistently tied to humanity’s carnal nature and is distinctly separated from cognitive processes.

If this historically heralded separation between mind and body exists, Elie Siegmeister coyly suggests, one must then logically accept that musicians exist within a vacuum in which they “will not question the social bases of the conditions under which they work, nor the social function of their work,” and that audiences without thought or question must consume the musical products, without hope of shaping the products themselves as there is no real relation to the material world (12). In Aronowitz’s view this is exemplified by the cultural contingent of the counterculture simply dropping out of the political world. Such clear delineations between cultural products and the political and material world are absurd. Instead, scholars need to reflect the realities and uses of music in everyday life and hence its effect on social and historical life. Although a

conveniently essentializing perspective, the effects of music and cultural products as a whole do not live in isolation from the world and are deeply embedded in the forces that are involved in ideological creation and maintenance.

All scholars do not universally segregate the separation of mind and body in regards to musical forms. Small sees music as an intricate facet of the human experience in *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening*, where a clear separation between musical practice and ideological life is annihilated. He asserts, “Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do” (2). Instead of an autonomous entity, music, like speech or thought is an intrinsic tool of human communication and meaning making. The rise of capital has further entrenched a notion of set boundaries concerning the life of music in society. To repeat the themes of the authors examined thus far, Small contends that the traditional partitioning of “operations of the mind” working “independently of the body, is all the more pervasive for being unrecognized for what it is: an assumption, by no means to be accepted without scrutiny” (52). The system of capital then has taken already a false delineation and placed it within its system as a specialized practice,

our present-day concert life, whether ‘classical’ or ‘popular,’ in which the ‘talented’ few are empowered to produce music for the ‘untalented’ majority, is based on a falsehood. It means that our powers of making music for ourselves have been hijacked and the majority of people robbed of the musicality that is theirs by right of birth, while a few stars, and their handlers, grow rich and famous through selling us what we have been led to believe we lack (Small 8).

If one invests in the idea of a separation of music from meaningful everyday cognitive practice, Aronowitz's notions of separate countercultures are extremely useful and easy borders to use in an examination of historical inquiry. However, if one takes Small's contention and looks to the falsity of this separation between mind/body and performer/audience, a group like the MC5 is a much more active and useable tool of ideological creation and understanding than some would hope. This is the case even though the group is part of this media onslaught. Critical analysis and interest in the group whether through various audiences including: the authorities, fans, and critics, showcases a lively and continued discussion surrounding the band, its political associations and intent that transcends body/mind borders. The band provides this intersection of debate because they provided an active text from which some authentically invested in the desire for social change and development including direct challenges to existing power structures and ideologies. The themes of youthful rebellion in rock's early life were an active agent in the creation of identity, as the process of musicking according to Small,

is part of the survival equipment of every human being. To music is not a mere enhancement of spare-time enjoyment but is an activity by means of which we learn what are our ideal social relationships, and that is as important for the growth of an individual to full social maturity as is talking and understanding speech (210).

The MC5's linking of this useable space of rebellion to revolutionary rhetoric and style, regardless of their individual levels of commitment, played a key role in testing the

conceptualizations of music and media's roles in the creation of ideology. By blurring these lines, the band demonstrated the dangerous linkage that could occur when these two processes were combined, and indeed were used as possible tools of social and ideological construction.

Interviews with group members themselves, and associated names in the White Panther Party today, provided a similar discussion concerning the very real processes of musicking. Sinclair testified in the MC5's first album's liner notes to the need for music to not be just merely a sovereign entity. The theme of "separation is doom" as Sinclair described in the notes in regards to music, continues as an ideological center for the group. Michael Davis explains,

We need to bring music to our children. We need to bring music to society as a more important facet of life. We need to not look at music as an extra, as a piece of candy on the side, as an appetizer to real life. We need to treat it just as if it is important as anything else...as religion, as knowledge of the law, or of physics, or of anything. We need to bring it into focus, because music and art are really basic human tropes to represent a sense of what we see.

He adds, "We want every child, every person to understand the value of communicating with music. This is my revelation, that music brings peace and a higher intellect, a higher understanding of who we are and where we want to go." When asked about music having a direct connection to the creation of ideology he shares, "Everything has a political connotation...kind of sort of...Sometimes it comes back to basic human needs



of communicating honestly. I don't know how you could be dishonest and play music" (Davis 2006).

In 2006, Davis along with his wife Angela aimed to put the above thoughts into action founding "Music is Revolution," an organization that seeks to assist in the funding of school music programs, and provide refurbished instruments to students. These actions are undertaken by the organization in the hopes of reinstating Davis's ideas of music's centrality in education. According to the organization's manifesto, encouraging music education leads to, "increasing the cultural and academic prosperity of this and future generations of public school children." Davis writes, "To play in an ensemble is an enriching process that teaches us the basis of community. When you consider the fact that all of us exist in concert as the human race, it becomes obvious that from this very parallel we can learn how to be better humans" ([www.musicisrevolution.org](http://www.musicisrevolution.org)). Music, instead of being a casual aside in educational paths, is focused on in the organization as a foundational absolute for development and growth.

Davis, like his cohort Dennis "Machine Gun" Thompson, would agree with Small's perspectives regarding the importance and everyday use of music to construct meaning. Hence, a possibility exists for its link to political and revolutionary thought, "Music is powerful stuff and it has an element of social change. It can change...but I think it happens on the individual level...that's the key here. It happens on a person to a person basis, not over movements" (Thompson 2006). Music, to these two individuals, is a practice within itself that does not have the formal ability to lead and dictate the path

of adept political and social change in isolation, but is instead based upon a larger network of political and cultural texts.

Wayne Kramer who along with Rob Tyner, have been cited as the most politically impassioned representative of the band's involvement with White Panther initiatives, mirrors his band-mate's reflections with perhaps more faith in music's role in social change movements. Yet he does not isolate music as an entity strong enough in itself to create lasting change. Kramer states,

We try to infuse our hopes in there or our fears. When people come to the art, when they come to the message...it's a meeting place. If you listen to "Masters of War" and say "man, that's a great fucking song" and I listen to "Masters of War" and I say "That is a great song," then we've just met, we've unified in a sense. It's eliminating the distance between us, which is the role of art...to eliminate the gap between people. To show that we are way more alike than we are different.

He continues, "It's not to man the barricades. Artists have a role in it all. Some people march in the street, some people write letters, some people go to law school, run for office and some people sing songs about it." Kramer reasserts in his interview that like the liner notes written by Sinclair in *Kick Out the Jams*, definitive separation of the cultural and political is a falsity; it is instead a symbiotic relationship intrinsically shaping everyday life:

The culture informs the politics, but the politics reinforces the culture. You can't separate them. Our political life is as real as our cultural life. I'm certainly on the

cultural side, but I can't deny that the politics inform a lot of it. Trying to sing songs and tell stories and be honest about the human condition and the human condition is managed by our political systems (Kramer 2006).

Although heavily debated, the band, whose career helped shape Davis's, Kramer's and Thompson's minds in regards to music's role in social change and potentially revolutionary thought, provided an incredibly useable space to measure the function of music in these processes for audiences. Former White Panther Minister of Defense, Pun Plamondon, asserts,

Popular capitalist culture is only interested in promoting capitalist economy and capitalist politics. Revolutionary culture, on the other hand, is involved in promoting revolutionary economics and politics. I always felt that we could develop and promote a revolutionary culture prior to a political and economic revolution. A revolutionary culture would make the political and economic revolution easier. If the revolutionary culture was successful it would minimize the violence of the political and economic revolution since a large mass of people would already be living in a revolutionary culture. Understand economics is the very foundation of society. Politics reflects and supports the economic system. Culture reflects and supports both the economic system and political system (Plamondon 2006).

As Minister of Defense, Plamondon was looked upon by the MC5 as too progressive in terms of political aims and revolutionary thought in regards to his plans for the band. Relationships with Plamondon and increasingly combative rhetoric would bring upon

greater governmental interest and difficulties for the band. Here, as with the prior focus on John Sinclair, the useable space came to represent a polymorphic entity used to varying degrees as: a jumping off point for Plamondon's revolution, a perceived direct threat to national security by the FBI, a marketing ploy, or an entity causing "compression" as Davis had suggested.

### **Tear Down the Wall! Now, What? Determining if Music Can Equal a Movement**

As a basic mode of constructing identity, according to Small, music can help to negotiate feelings of belonging, community, history, and memory. Music also further perpetuates ideology. The MC5's success and downfall as a "revolutionary rock" band points out the discrepancies in possibility and interpretation by numerous interested parties that are invested in music and its perceived roles. Perhaps music's greatest drawback in regards to being an autonomous and unified tool of social change in itself is that music is an interpretive process in which modes of communication are not transparent. Hence, a group like the MC5, with so many interested parties involved in its life and career, including a media eager to make sense and to frame such a group as either the vanguard of the revolution or as imposters, quickly became the possession of numerous users. Because of this, it slipped beyond any intended frames from the individual creators themselves.

This multiplicity of viewpoints can both allow a sense of community and communal dissent, as well as represent divergent and sometimes contestable uses of these same texts. Small describes that when one partakes in the practice of music, one is,

looking for different kinds of relationships, and we should not project the ideals of one kind of performance onto another. Any performance, and that includes a symphony concert, should be judged finally on its success in bringing into existence for as long as it lasts a set of relationships that those taking part feel to be ideal in enabling those taking part to explore, affirm, and celebrate those relationships. Only those taking part will know for sure what is their nature (Small 49).

Searching out different relationships through musical texts is exemplified by the numerous perspectives on what the MC5 did and could mean in society either as a live act or even through the capital-dependent recording process. The latter, Small contends, is causing separation between performer and listener. However, if one looks closer, such a medium could and did create meaningful spaces of constructing social identity and location for listeners. The collecting of interviews from group members concerning their upbringings and experiences with the music industry, technology, their surroundings, racism, and politics, all showcase contexts in which group members sought out uses for the band. Differing use values were also extended by those who were involved in the band's career and the life of the WPP such as Sinclair and Plamondon. Such was the case as well within their fan-base, by supportive and damning critics, and by the government. All of the viewpoints mentioned looked to a product of popular music to negotiate their perspectives.

For those invested in the band and/or their revolutionary potential, the space of performance and musical practice brought intimate spaces where memory and

consciousness were shaped through mass-mediated forms (Lipsitz viii) either through albums or more immediately in live performance. Here, temporary communities, or to borrow a phrase from Hakim Bey, “temporary autonomous zones” were created; utopian spaces of escape or collectivism that were beyond the reach of anyone beyond those immediately experiencing it (Bey x-xi). The divergent uses and perceptions that face-to-face interviews with those in the band as well as those connected through the White Panther community, exemplify these spaces of interaction amongst audiences and the MC5 and the individual notions of community that came with their experiences. Davis’ hope for a communal nirvana through a symbiotic relationship between performer and audience through the practice of “high energy” music showcases the utopian potentiality of united audiences. Regardless of whether participation meant investment in just the music/performance aspect, or in the rhetoric of the White Panther Party concerning revolutionary aims, a community could be established. Shelia Whitely describes in *The Space Between the Notes*, that “it might be argued that on stage the groups’ sexual aggression was little more than formalised and ritualised violence, the music nevertheless has a neurotic element which, in its more frenzied form, evokes a pseudo-tribal paranoia” (82). Whatever anarchistic sound or reputation the band garnered, this tribal cohesion was still a possible outcome for their audiences.

Sinclair discusses this important notion of community and autonomy in *Music and Politics* at a local level saying local scenes “are reflective of the unique social conditions” (21) of the area. In the case of Detroit the scene is made up by a, “rock- and urban-soul-based music, an intense energy feeling, and a close, tight involvement with *its*

audience” (22). Nationally and internationally Lipsitz’s notion that memory and meaning are created through mass mediated communities was proven over and over again through the MC5. It was made possible through the sales of their LPs, radio and television exposure, and even in media attention in international magazines such as *Mojo* and *Uncut*.

The professionalization that Small discusses as creating false stratifications of performer and audience are here, but there is also ability for communities large and small to actively center themselves around these products. Such varying levels of local and global can be negotiated by consumers of popular music in relationship to a text like the MC5, from levels of complete or partial acceptance, misinterpretation, compared to individual authors’ intents. The negotiation can also result in complete disregard of the text. This active process of negotiation is one that De Certeau calls “dancing on a tightrope” (73). Here audiences are able to create levels of meaning and belonging by their ability to recreate an equilibrium through the use and disuse of popular culture materials, thus making meaning of their lives through an endless supply of materials and signs. This creates a “ceaseless creativity of a kind of taste in practical experience” (73), including the creation of potential temporary communities based upon shared knowledge and appreciation of popular culture texts like the MC5.

Useable rebellion is centered in this process, in that participants in popular culture can use these texts for their own purposes, including framing the political and social world around them. Differing levels of investment can even, as Tricia Rose discusses in *Black Noise*, “produce communal bases of knowledge about social conditions,

communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance” (99-100). As illustrated, this was the hope of a contingent of the WPP, to produce a cultural base for their notions of revolution. This contingent was on one side of the spectrum while at the other end was the band acting as a means to garner cash and women. Represented here, within the organization itself, is part of the greater fluctuation in usability connected with the band and their association to the White Panther Party, from audiences, critics, the authorities, and from themselves. Where one was in the spectrum reflected investment, or lack thereof, in the increasingly overt political rhetoric and associations of the group and its connected propaganda.

It is these same notions of usability by audiences that also constrain products of popular culture in the creation of ideology in everyday life. De Certeau refers to popular culture as “a dark rock that resists all assimilation” (18) because texts like the MC5 cannot communicate or create an absolute voice. Users of popular culture are like, “nomads poaching their way across field they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves” (174). In the case of the MC5 and of rock in general, this usability was the case for those constructing the text themselves. The ability of media to frame these entities and the uses that audiences, critics and governmental interest had for the text demonstrate a vast contingent of poachers using a product that did not even complete understanding of itself *internally*.

For some like Davis and Thompson, directed youthful rebellion became too quickly problematic, whereas for others, to differing levels, like Sinclair, Kramer. and Plamondon, their experiences with the group and its political life, gave glimmers of hope



in the realm of music's power to change the course of the world around them. Due to these multiple frames of reference from individuals associated with the group, varying levels of meaning creation were employed by both media outlets seeking to frame the band and the WPP, as well as with audiences and the participants themselves. As Small argues, "In fact, in neither verbal nor gestural languages is there a complete one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified" (60). Here, the MC5 was used as a raw material in which identities were negotiated through the music itself as well as through the political associations of the group with the WPP.

Even with media frames seeking to create clear and concise interpretations of social and cultural forces like the MC5 and the WPP, the power and reach of popular cultural products in the creation of ideology and perhaps direct action, is subject to these interpretive processes by those using the product for their own means and consumption. Siegmeister contends that the complexity of this meaning-making process of using and interpreting musical products is oblique and does not equal direct influence, "Social influences do not act in an immediate, direct, simple way. Often the effect is delayed, circuitous, oblique; in most cases a broad effect, felt over a long period of time, not perhaps discernable in one particular instance, but evident in a broad collection of instances" (20). The connection of the MC5 to revolutionary and dissident rhetoric and image tested this supposed delay, by connecting the social and the musical into a product that for some could ignite direct action and tear down such notions of displacement and tepidness.

The focus on the band by governmental authorities is a telling reaction that did not separate the cultural from the political. The authorities looked to a cultural product as one possibly demanding action and continued surveillance. The wealth of documents collected on the MC5 and the White Panther Party showcase a government that was not so sure about the “obliqueness” of music’s influence in creating dissent. Says Thompson; “Back in those days they had nothing to compare it to. The FBI was afraid of it...it might go the other way. Kids might start burning shit down; they just might start picking up guns and assassinating rich people and people in power...” (2006). The direct action that was feared, according to Thompson, of course did not provide in itself the spark that ignited the tearing down of the status quo. Topics of power and its connection to music had a long history before and after the MC5. One can see music being a focus of governmental concern globally such as in the intense focuses on content in Castro’s Cuba, to the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) in the US, a group that rose to fame targeting figures like Frank Zappa in the 1980s for fear of music being “prime cause of unwanted mass behavior” (Fischlin 30).

The concern towards these musical texts seems to be focused on the fact that as a product of mass culture, music possesses an omnipresence that is difficult to control and that can easily reach vast audiences with challenges to the established order. This crossover confronts ideas of musical marginalization that authors like T.V. Reed who say that a failure exists in the ability to, “distinguish degrees or levels of cultural politics, or to think carefully about the relative scale of impact of a given practice or discourse” (290). With cases like the MC5, the concern of reach and power was not questioned.

Music, in its capabilities of creating effective autonomous zones for its listeners to invest, disregard or misinterpret authors' frames, represents a difficult to isolate, but still very real, space of ideological construction and community creation. This creation can be empowered or dissipated due to its dependence on the technology of mass communications. Small's notions of immediacy and foundational social location found in the daily practice of music, for better or worse, has met the realities of mass mediation head on. The MC5, regardless of the revolution's promises or fallacies and one's investment or lack thereof in the group, provided a text under which these vast and powerful topics could be examined concretely both from emancipatory and repressive perspectives. Such a case study can also offer significant insight into the realities of useable rebellion through music, and its place in the future regarding processes of social change and development.

### **Looking to the Future of Music: Music's Role in Future Revolutions**

By taking on the rhetoric, image, and arguably sound, of an idealized revolution, the MC5 at the least demonstrated how connections between culture and politics could be made through musical practice. Practice here refers not only to the creation and spread of musical texts, but also their reception and use. Future discussions of music's role in social change, as the MC5's case study demonstrates, need to discard the false parameters separating the cultural and the political, the mind and body. Although they are convenient categories, the realities of musical practice even within the technological and financial constraints of the modern mass media, are delineations that cannot be separated. As false or idealized sonic incarnations of the counterculture and the New Left, the MC5

were a very real, useable focal point from which individuals confronted and questioned the world around them. They were also a showcase of the immense investment and concern when these commonly separated entities are brought together.

Keeping such possibilities of music and politics meeting directly in mind, there is also a need to discard notions of music as a singular entity within itself that can independently perpetuate mass social change. One must keep in mind when tearing down these boundaries between cultural and political, the limits of this practice of usable rebellion through rock. Music is dependent, as the preceding chapters have shown, on an array of use values. From impassioned to superfluous, the right of these texts to speak does not guarantee the right to be consumed in idealized purity. Instead, music can be regarded as an intrinsic part to a whole. Culture and politics in the end cannot be separated clearly, if at all. The practice of music and the spaces of autonomy that it offers, like all human practices, are interdependent processes through which we find cohesion, community, investment, ideological construction and questioning.

The ideal notion of music working as a sovereign tool of dissent and social change within itself is a falsity that the MC5 case study helps us understand. This is not because music is not a powerful or cohesive form, but because it depends on media, technology, variance of audience use values, and, in the case of the MC5, is susceptible to government repression. Music could be considered a powerful and prevalent form, which has the capability of creating autonomous spaces where one can openly and actively confront and question the world that surrounds them. If one considers Small's notions of "musicking" then one could think of music being part of a process of learning

about and questioning the world. Like writing and speaking, music shapes our daily lives. It is also a deeply personal process as well due to its role in constructing social location. One must also realize, as Small complains, that music has become “hijacked” by a small set of professionals selling us, “what we have been led to believe we lack” (8).

Hence, a means by which we see the world has been relegated to a process dependent upon capital, industry and the technologies used to distribute it. The goal of establishing a cohesive community is still a very real possibility and perhaps best reflects why the government was so concerned with the band. If media forms are used to distribute an anti-authoritarian message, and groups like the MC5 and WPP actively communicate that message, what will the ramifications be? The answer in terms of this case study, was that the band and its associations were used in a wide-ranging spectrum by listeners, critics and the authorities as: a springboard for a revolution, a springboard to get girls and money, a demonstration of shameless marketing, and a threat to national security. In addition, the group provided a place to contend musical inspiration and musical hype, as well as a means to measure political fearlessness or politically selling-out. Very real communities could be united and just as easily torn apart when looking at the life of the MC5 and their involvement with countercultural life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These numerous frames point to a great difficulty for future musicians seeking to create autonomous programs for changing the world around them. If you say you want a revolution, as the Beatles sang in 1968, one best be prepared for creating countless highly individualized revolutions for those listening in.

In order to create a truly “rebel” music in the hopes of generating direct action and social change in an absolute form, one would need an ability to: shape media frames, manage governmental interest and potential repression, manage the consumption and restrict the usability of individual texts to audiences seeking to, as De Certeau would say “poach” those parts useful, and leaving behind those parts not desired. Simply put, music by itself, like political leadership by itself, or laws by themselves, cannot guarantee direct paths to mass social movements. Instead, groups like the MC5 are part of an intricate whole of intercontextuality where these parts all function together in adapting to and creating social change and development.

Music’s great power comes from the acute and impassioned usability of its texts by audiences to create meaning and to create active questioning of the world around them. Rock, like jazz, great symphonic works, opera or hip-hop offers these spaces in everyday life where ideologies are put to the test and are offered new challenges. Bands like the MC5 are such great threats to governments and to critics because there is a great fear that such supposedly wide-reaching and affective texts can mean so much to their audiences; audiences they may see as desperate, in search of leadership, or simply as ignorant. Regardless, these are audiences who can nonetheless find pathways to new ideologies in spite of the authenticity involved in its creation, or in the case of the MC5, the plethora of idealism, anger, youthful naivety, and self-indulgence that was mixed into an already complicated text before ever assaulting the ears of their listeners.

If the contention still exists that the “revolution will be televised,” one should be aware that music will provide the soundtrack and will be put into the hard-drives, Ipods,

car stereos, portable players and collective memories of the populaces seeking to create change and challenging the structures around them. In the process, music can provide momentary escape, or a momentary autonomous zone from which one can safely question everyday life. It can also simply be left at the door on the way home after the concert. The MC5 and the White Panther Party tested these relationships of power, pushing past the doors and into the streets. Once they got into those streets, the realities of the America they were commenting on violently hit back. Due to this push though, and the connecting of a band to a political party---however tongue and cheek it was to those involved---it provided some very real spaces from which all interested parties could determine if indeed, music is revolution.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Sinclair's Guitar Army for a cross-section of the WPP's self-generated press. Consult especially the "Rock and Roll Dope" series for examples of various framing methods.

<sup>ii</sup> Studies of the band such as in McNeil/McCain's *Please Kill Me* and Goodman's *The Mansion on a the Hill* do distribute the political responsibility to some extent. John Sinclair is normally the focus of investigations though into the White Panther Party specifically in such studies as Hull's "The White Panthers 'Total Assault on Culture,'" and Strausbaugh's *Rock 'Til You Drop*.

<sup>iii</sup> This mirrors the contextual class realities that Bradley discussed in *Understanding Rock 'n' Roll*, in the rise of the UK rock scene that was discussed earlier in the first chapter.

<sup>iv</sup> See a more detailed discussion of these affiliations in Chapter 3.

<sup>v</sup> The MC5 was recently featured in *Mojo Magazine's The Roots of the Sex Pistols*. Rage Against the Machine covered the MC5's "Kick Out the Jams" on 2000's *Renegades*.

<sup>vi</sup> The Black Panthers established numerous colonies across the nation including in such cities as Detroit, Chicago, New York and San Francisco/Oakland. The reach of the WPP in these terms will be discussed further in following chapters.

<sup>vii</sup> The Yippies, or The Youth International Party was in reality, several individuals such as Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Nancy Kurshan and Paul Krassner, who utilized the omnipresence of media to spread counter-cultural values. The Yippies are most widely remembered for their organized spectacles/demonstrations such as the "Festival of Life" in which they acted as mediated pied pipers calling for a youth presence.

<sup>viii</sup> See Chapter 5 for further discussion of this.

<sup>ix</sup> Chapter 5 deals specifically with state and federal authorities and their targeting primarily of Sinclair as well as Plamondon.

<sup>x</sup> For further discussion of drug use within the band see Carson's *Grit, Noise and Revolution* and Simmons/Nelson's *The Future is Now!*

<sup>xi</sup> Chapter 5 describes both the musical and visual output of the group in detail.

<sup>xii</sup> The MC5 has actually been featured on the FBI's "Reading Room" on their FOIA website.

<sup>xiii</sup> For the last and perhaps most surprising of these examples, see *Revelation: Revolution '69*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sinclair, Plamondon, the WPP were all the subject of surveillance

<sup>xv</sup> The song was written by his manager Al Smith

<sup>xvi</sup> For further info see Goodman 1997, Simmons/Nelson 2004

<sup>xvii</sup> See *Guitar Army* for these collected works

<sup>xviii</sup> Crawford also led the Church of Zenta, a fictitious church that as Kramer states, "Was a complete hustle to scam some money from people in the audience" to buy the MC5 family marijuana and alcohol.

<sup>xix</sup> The picture actually depicts a young man putting a flower in the barrel.

<sup>xx</sup> See "SleazeNation" and Robinson.



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