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Rock Never Dies: Sixties rock finds new fans among today's students

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Sixties rock finds new fans among today's students

BY BRENDAN SULLIVAN '06

It's a Thursday night at the campus pub and students are sifting through the new CD jukebox's selections—Led Zeppelin, Chicago, The Beatles. Eventually they decide on a track by Bob Seger, perhaps most famous for his lyric, "I reminisce about the days of old/ With that old time rock and roll."

It may be old, but that old-time rock and roll still plays on campuses today. Indeed, the Blue Light Pub was packed that night with students born nearly 20 years after this music was first released. "You can't point at a time with better music, definitely not today," Jack Sisson '06 hollered over the strains of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son," an anti-Vietnam War song released in 1969.

Alumni from the 1960s and 1970s returning to campus today would find that some things have changed but that much of the music that college students enjoy today was the soundtrack of a previous generation. "I have had students come by and talk to me with incredible, detailed knowledge, as only a fan would know, about rock in the late Sixties," said Bernhard Professor of Music Paul Machlin. "They knew the careers of the individual musicians and who had soloed at what point in each song. And I'm just sitting there astonished."

Instead of rejecting their parents' music as did past generations, today's Colby students are embracing it. Over the din of treadmills, stationary bikes, and clanking dumbbells during a busy afternoon at the Alfond Athletic Center, Jimi Hendrix's "Fire" blasts through

the wall-mounted speakers. In his West Quad triple decorated with Jim Morrison mug shots and concert playbills ("Bob Dylan Live in Greenwich Village 1960" and "The Grateful Dead Live in Golden Gate Park 1972"), Mark Biggar '07 plays vintage Dead tunes.

Off campus, six senior girls residing in Waterville gather around one of their two record players trading off selected cuts from their favorite vinyl LPs: Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, and The Beatles' *Let It Be*.

ROCK NEVER DIES

This cultural phenomenon has critics, music-industry execs, and even music scholars scratching their heads. After all, this is the generation of iPods and file sharing. Why use whiz-bang music technology to listen to music from the age of eight-track tapes? "I cannot tell you why this particular generation of students has found our generation's music so attractive," Machlin said.

But he can speculate.

Many of today's college students grew up steeped in their parents' music, Machlin points out. The musical education of his own two children began as they listened to Martha Reeves and the Vandellas—in their car seats. His students last semester in a course on American protest music, 1945-1970, have told him their parents not only listened to Sixties rock but listened with passion and enthusiasm.

But why? "The glib answer would be that it's better music," Machlin said. "That's the answer I'm tempted to give, but what does that mean?"

To Colbians of an earlier generation, the scene at Kelly's apartment would be startlingly familiar. In fact, Kelly and her platter-spinning, rock and roll-loving roommates are following in the footsteps of Colby women who rocked their downtown neighbors more than 35 years ago, according to Christine "Chris" Crandall '70. "We would blast [Led] Zeppelin all the time and we knew every single word," she said.

Crandall's voice—and her penchant for rock music and memorizing lyrics—landed her a gig as the lead singer of Colby's staple campus band, Love Equation, which opened for Janis Joplin at the Waterville Armory in 1969. The band's gigging did not end there, as they reassembled in 2004 and 2005 at Colby reunions, thinking their classmates would love hearing the classics from their college days.

As it turned out, the audience on the hill wasn't all over the hill. As Love Equation cranked out '60s covers to the delight of their contemporaries, more recent graduates snuck away from their

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Professor Paul Machlin

own reunion party nearby, drawn by the music. "All of a sudden these young kids crashed the party and started dancing," said Ron Caruso '69, singer, guitarist, and the band's founder. "They were loving it as much as anyone."

While their love for classic rock may have started with listening to their parents' music, most of today's students never stopped loving it. "I think our parents' generation was one that *rejected* the morals and ideas of their parents' generation, whereas we are much more accepting of our parents' values and, specifically, musical taste," said Sisson, who graduated in May.



And for those who *were* there back then, the spontaneity and celebration Kelly talks about enjoying today was indeed the most exciting aspect of the music. "It was a time of unfettered rock development, when rock was an open celebration of blues, country, and soul that had come together," said Greg Williams, assistant director of operations at the Colby College Museum of Art and a longtime rock guitarist who organized last summer's exhibition of guitars, *The Player's Art*. "You got a rush just from turning on the radio."

Times have changed, as a few large companies now own the majority of radio stations, limiting radio diversity. In response students turn much more to CDs, MP3s, or Internet sources to listen to music. It has gotten to the point that devout music fan Melanie Scott '06 admitted, "I never realized how great [Colby's radio station] WMHB was until senior year when I was woken up by my new radio alarm clock, because I never really listened to radio."

But where today's radio lags, the visual media excel. With



Fans of vinyl, from left, housemates Jennifer Coliflores '06, Samantha Chun '06, and Sarah Kelly '06, read liner notes while listening to albums at home off-campus in Waterville. Some of their favorites include vintage Marvin Gaye and Beatles.



an onslaught of vintage concert footage remastered on DVD, it has never been easier to see classic rockers in concert. For students who weren't born when The Jimi Hendrix Experience played the Lewiston Armory in March 1968 (\$2.50 a ticket), several Hendrix concerts are available on DVD. The same goes for those who missed The Grateful Dead in Bangor in April 1971; the Dead conveniently recorded a live video that same month at the Fillmore East.

Kelly recently was the host at a viewing party at the Mary Low Coffeehouse of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, featuring The Band. A large group of students showed up, she said, because "it showed musicians all getting together to

play, back when money wasn't the focus, because so few bands today do concerts for the fans."

(The Band was not always so loyal to Colby fans. Slated for a gig on Mayflower Hill on February 20, 1970, The Band never showed up. Its notoriously difficult front-man Robbie Robertson cited a "viral infection," although *The Colby Echo* reported that Robertson and friends performed healthily the following night at Boston College.)

Today's emphasis on, and innovation in, newer genres such as hip-hop and electronic music may also explain why students look to the past for the best in rock and roll. "Talent used to be focused into country, rock, acid music, and folk,"

said Bruce McDougal, Colby's director of safety and former professional rock musician. "Add the political climate [of the 1960s and 1970s], the drug movement, and the great home stereo equipment coming out at the time, and everybody wanted to be part of it."

And so do young people today. "I just think of the way Jimi Hendrix used to hit those unbelievable notes or even used feedback as part of his songs—you just don't see people doing such original things today," said guitarist Avi David '08. Indeed it was a time of rock-music innovation, as electric amplifiers and music production technologies developed. Or as McDougal put it, "It was the first time three people could shake the walls."



FRED FIELD

Other students feel a mix of appreciation and skepticism about classic rock, believing time has elevated music of the '60s, essentially *making* the music better. "It has always taken a generation to figure out which is a classic album," said Adam Souza '06, who headed the recently dissolved Colby Record Club, a group that gathered weekly to listen to vintage rock and jazz albums. Case in point: *The Colby Echo* dismissed the newly released Beatles' *White Album* in 1968, labeling it "a failure." Both discs of that iconic double album sit prominently in the Blue Light Pub jukebox today. With the benefit of hindsight, students sifted out the good from the bad from the '60s/'70s era.

Other classics are recognized from the start. In the wake of

The Beatles' breakup, two *Echo* reviewers wrote in 1970, "England need[s] a new king—enter Led Zeppelin." Judging from the reviewers' regal language, music was huge in the lives of that generation. "Musicians were leaders, parts of social movements, not just entertainers," Williams said.

But does the rebellious nature of rock icons like Zeppelin, Dylan, or Hendrix really have the same effect on today's youngsters as it did on listeners during the Vietnam era? No, says McDougal. "Led Zeppelin has become a safe band today," he said. "They offer 'safe rebellion,' and the record companies figure, 'Why make new rock if the old stuff still sells?'" he said.

In fact, the record industry's "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" attitude has scored The Beatles and Led Zeppelin number-one

Sixties rock on their iPods, Ryan Scott '07, left, and Mark Biggar '07 in their dorm room in West Quad, decorated with 1960s memorabilia, including concert posters for Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead.



albums in the 21st Century—decades after the bands broke up and with some members deceased. And while it is not bad for disbanded rock legends to have a healthy legacy, the repetitive marketing of the same music has had harmful effects, according to some. “A lot got said in the Sixties and Seventies, and then corporate America latched onto it,” Williams said. “Everything original got branded and its spirit got squashed.”

Yet industry experts say record labels cannot be scapegoated for giving their audi-

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ences what they want. “The average Joe isn’t the guy looking to discover new music at the record store; it’s the guy who flips on the radio in the car. He’s the guy the record labels want to appeal to,” said Geoff Mayfield, director of charts at *Billboard* magazine. Record labels do give people plenty of options—they release about 30,000 new albums and reissues per year, Mayfield estimated—but the public’s interest in full-length albums seems to be waning. “The marketing departments for record labels are really scratching their heads on how to connect with youth through rock music, because young people are responding more to classic rock sound bytes from ads and movies than they do to listening to albums,” Mayfield said.

The sound bytes are hard to miss. Led Zepelin has been featured in Cadillac television commercials. The Rolling Stones sell tunes to Microsoft, and even Iron Butterfly’s “Inna Gadda Da Vida” became the soundtrack for a Fidelity Investments commercial. Web sites have popped up that list the songs from ads so that people can find out who they are by and where to get them.

“There is a longing for authenticity, for something exciting, for that period that turned history into a musical movement,” said Daniel Contreras, assistant professor of English and expert in popular culture. “But this nostalgia for it can

be a very conservative impulse, turning us deaf and blind to artistic innovation in our own time.” Canonizing ’60s and ’70s rock as classic rock does put immense pressure on all future rock bands to sound like their predecessors and can cause deviants from that classic sound to be scorned by rock purists.

Another push to a more canonical rock sound was the popularizing of the critical term “the return to rock,” describing a recent influx of bands reaching for a vintage sound. Coming largely as a response to the prepackaged pop music of ’90s “boy-bands” and more recently *American Idol*, rock fans and critics welcomed bands that dressed like Mick Jagger or sounded like The Velvet Underground. Critics raved about The White Stripes and The Strokes, saying that rock is back, Souza said, “but you can’t resurrect a passed art form. Rock isn’t coming back any more than Romanticism is.”

But perhaps it doesn’t have to. Listeners over generations have realized there was something happening musically in those few years that can’t be duplicated. As Dylan recently told CBS’s *60 Minutes* about his own work, “I don’t know how I got to write those songs. Those early songs were almost magically written. . . . But I can’t do that [anymore].”