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Doctorate thesis:
THE ACT OF WORD IN
ROCK MUSIC
summary

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The idea of this thesis arises from the author's passion for both music and literature. Guitar and poetry can be partners and are close to the soul eager for freedom, playfulness and spiritual evolution. The combination of the two has often led to the creation of the artistic masterpieces, which we tried to analyze the pages of the thesis. *The Act Of Word In Rock Music* is a unique work in the Romanian rock phenomenon because it addressed this dual perspective.

About rock music was written and will be written (auto) biographies, histories, critical works, all arising from a desire to better understand this artistic phenomenon of modern times. Since the advent of Richard Goldstein's book, *The Poetry Of Rock* (1969), the lyrics of rock music were suspected of poetic, of kinship with the Poems. In earlier times, such a statement was quite daring and challenging at the same time because for the literary criticism it was hard to accept that there are other forms of poetry (than the classic known type), which may have a similar structure.

The thesis is divided into five chapters.

The beginning chapter includes an introduction in rock history, origins, since the first outbreaks of rock'n'roll until the consecration of rock as a musical genre. Artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley And The Comets had an important role in revolutionizing the music after the war. We also discussed the link between music and literature, from the perspective of the old and new criticism which later helped in understanding the phenomenon of rock in depth.

The next four chapters are devoted to artists that had to say something *in* and *through* music: Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and Frank Zappa. Bob Dylan was the voice of his generation in terms of pacifist messages, Morrison is the fervent critic, abstract poet, Zappa can be considered a modern day Jonathan Swift, while Hendrix is a guitar wizard and *voodoo child*. If Dylan, Morrison and Zappa were studied intensively (Dylan being appreciated by

critics), less attention has enjoyed Jimi Hendrix, seen mostly as a guitar innovator, and less as an ingenious lyrics composer. In the pages of this paper we tried to see if Hendrix wrote lyrics worthy of the status of poetry.

The Act Of Word In Rock Music tried to capture both components of rock (music and lyrics), which is rare in most works because they usually deal with just one aspect. We talked about *music act* - how music notes act on the lyrics, and the *word act* - aims the meaning that they develop in the context of music.

I considered the '60s, '70s and early '80s most important for our work, because it contains songs that had a major social impact. And as a subject, I had the rock music in the United States and Britain, because these countries have created ideal conditions for the development of this artistic movement. Sure, exercises of rock music there were also in other parts of the world, but they were influenced by American and British bands, making it difficult for them to become popular, often Communism putting them, as happened in Romania, large obstacles.

Air, water, fire and earth are the primary elements. Matter originated in four roots, as Empedocles Greek philosopher asserts. Two millennia later, Gaston Bachelard classifies imagination depending on the connection with the four elements. Each element material should make his own substance, its own rules and poetics.

This thesis tried to look at how the word moves into musical areas as an important (primary) status in composing and creating art rock music. We distinguish, correlated with the four elements, the following dichotomy: the *air-word*, *fire-word* and *water-music* and *earth-music*. The four materialize rock, this form of contemporary art, an important presence in the society.

Earth-music is the foundation of the rock.

Any song is composed of a melody, a sequence of musical notes arranged by composer rendered portable and listener (receiver) through musical instruments. In this way rock music composition changes. Notes on the staff are less present, having studied modern artists. Frank Zappa says that “All the good music has already been written by people with wigs and stuff.”

The composition of a rock piece (*the earth*) is much simplified. Often, the artists take the guitar in their hands, and while riding to the next concert, they compose another piece. We tried, in this thesis, to analyze the structure of the music chords. We concluded that, most often, well-known songs have a maximum of three or four chords. The scales used are limited, especially in the beginning of rock music. Rock'n'Roll music derives from blues, music that is based on the pentatonic scale. In the second chapter I talked about Bob Dylan, the guitar poet. For him, music is only a pretext for poetry. Dylan, often borrows melodies of other songs, for example, the song *Nottamun Town*, written by someone else, to whom Dylan had eventually paid some compensation. *With God On Our Side* With a controversial song that is identical, at least melodic, with *The Patriot Game* by Dominic Behan, in its turn inspired by Irish folk song, *The Merry Month of May*.

Knocking on Heaven's Door has four chords, three major G, D, C and a minor one: A. The use of minor chords gives a sad and pessimistic note to the song. We found that to suggest sadness, minor scales are used.

The Rolling Stones, for example, with their *Sympathy for the Devil* emphasize the rhythm track that is catchy from the very beginning - exotic, relaxed. The carnivalesque atmosphere is supported equally by the melodic line. The savage like rhythm is present throughout the song. The chords used are simple: E major, D major and A major. *Satisfaction* doesn't have a complex structure either, and comes down to a few notes played with a fuzz effect. Musically, it looks like a song that you could learn at school.

The ingenuity of the rock composer lies in creating an original riff, a beat, a rhythm, a certain musical temporality that gives the song an identity. Ultimately, the musical line is an expression of each artist. The discussion about Lessing, in the first chapter, reveals that each artist has his own interpretation, an interpretation limited by the structure of each particular art. *Earth-music* is associated directly with the artist, with his internal psychological structure, with his imagery. Rock music is most often a collective act of the members of a band. But music is connected to *earth*, in this case, the public - the receiver gains importance in the creative act because, as we noted in the chapter dedicated to rebellion, rock bands took into account the needs of those to whom they were singing. The society felt the need of liberation from the restrictions and canons of times. If the blues was sung by blacks only in communities, thundering Rock'n'Roll rises, liberating the '50s, the white man's world. Rock music is the base of the change.

But not all the rock songs are simple. There are some bands whose power of composing approaches the classics. Among them we mention Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. The orchestrations of some of their songs approach the complexity of classical compositions.

Earth-music is the foundation bearing the message. Without it, the lyrics would become simple texts. For example, repetition plays an important role in a song, being present in the chorus. If we remove the music, the lyrics could well become the expression of poetic obsessions or aberrations, as we met in some of the songs of Frank Zappa.

Water-music is the waves of the notes that invite to dance. When analyzing the sound spectrum, I noticed that the musical notes are shaped like waves. Before the war, a band concert involved a static presence. Music was heard and applauded at the end. Listeners were imposed tacit, passive behavior.

The appearance of Rock'n'Roll changes the attitude of the listener who can no longer abstain himself from not taking part.

Water-music stirs the senses, releases the energy and makes the spectator to live the creative act. At the same time, worries, sorrows, frustrations are forgotten. The vibration of the music excites the senses, luring positive feelings, sexually incites. Responsible are the artists. Their display on stage, the music they sing, the lyrics incite to entertainment, fun, and to revolt!

Artists, in turn, jaunty, dance energetically, talk to the public, make reference, through their moves, to intercourse. Often, artistic events included sexual innuendo, a taboo in those days. Spectators can no longer control themselves, the bands get covered by the hysterical screams of the crowd. Sometimes it almost does not matter what they sing, the desire for liberation from the rules of society is extremely high.

The Beatles change everything. We notice the shift of the attention from the soloist to all the members of the band, something never seen before. The band members sing with the audience invited them to dance. Their gestures are extremely simple - a static uniform swinging. The rhythm invites to dancing and all the energy that the performers were using in their theatrical game turns into a simple but challenging move. Thus, the act of interpretation becomes a happening, an invitation to active participation.

Earth-music and *water-music* are the perfect environment to the other two elements - *fire-word*, *air-word*, with which they form *the artistic concept of rock music*.

Fire-word is the cry of revolt of the new generations. 60s in the United States represent a profound social transformation period. Blacks require equality between men, the sexual revolution is in full swing, the war in Vietnam, initially supported by the American people, turns into revolt. Rock music becomes

conscious of the needs of generations to be addressed. The lyrics start having reference to political, social problems of the time. Bob Dylan is among the first to feel that a change must take place, in music too. If until then the music meant mostly rhythm, Dylan reformulates the classical compositional structure of a song, putting emphasis on the message of the lyrics. His first album contains critical lyrics, for instance, in 1963, suggestively entitled *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. In the song *Masters of War*, Dylan embodies the average American, marked by the fear of the beginning of a new war, the anger and protest against state institutions supporting the war industry. Dylan surpasses the status of an ordinary man and takes the role of the people's advocate, directly accusing those involved in the war industry. Not as aggressive is *Blowin' In The Wind*. Here, the charges take the form of rhetorical questions meant to awaken the conscience of the people. Later, Dylan becomes pacifist.

In the UK, The Rolling Stones are dissatisfied with the superficiality of society. Although their songs often have strong sexual connotations, some are critical of the world around them. *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* contains a double negation, a sharp discontent against the direction the society is heading – a superficial, throwaway society.

The band The Who with Pete Townshend on guitar, launches a new hit to the public, which became increasingly larger at their performances. *My Generation* refers to a new group of young, *The Mods*, originated from the term *Modernists*, but over time it becomes the symbol of all generations who rebel. *The Mods* influence the music, but rock also shapes them in its turn. Disregarded by their parents, teens look for their identity. The revolt includes also self-irony. Roger Daltrey's stammering voice suggests the incompetence of the young versus the old generation.

The fire-words are directed against the war by Creedence Clearwater Revival. *Fortunate Son* is released during the Vietnam War, after president

Nixon's speech (1969) which attacked all those who were against the war. *Fortunate Son* is the story of a poor son sent in the front line of the war. The gap between those who are born with rights, in wealthy families and the poor ones becomes evident when the latter are required the supreme sacrifice: dying for the country. Ironically, the song becomes emblematic for the American nation. The same happens with *Born in the USA* (1984).

Pink Floyd's Roger Waters is profoundly marked by the loss of his father. Many of his songs lament the parental absence which had repercussions on the life of the young Roger. He builds himself a wall of fears which helps him defend against the outside harsh world. The wall turns into thematic album *The Wall*, whose character, Pink, like Roger, is forced to face the world without the help of his father. *Another Brick In The Wall* attacks the educational system, where the frustrated teacher pours his swelter on his students. The educational process means complete respect and submission to the teacher, and inhibiting any trace of imagination or expression of self. Incidentally, the lyrics contain intended grammatical errors made by the author: *We don't need no education or leave them kids alone*. *Another Brick In The Wall* is the *fire-word* of all time students.

But *fire-word* can take the form of satire. Frank Zappa was not afraid to attack with a smile, a good part of his albums are nothing but criticism of politicians or personalities of his times. *Who Are The Brain Police* is a reference to George Orwell's 1984 dystopia. Frank Zappa accuses those leading the society from behind, like puppeteers. The lyrics conveyed in the songs of revolt get additional connotations over time. The events for which they were written are lost, but new meanings come to life in the contexts to come.

Along with *fire-word* we encounter the *air-word*. The air is the one that keeps the fire of songs and aims to maintain the life of lyrics. Unlike the other

three primary elements, the air is not palpable or visible. *Air-word* is the concept that refers to something that is not seen but exists. It refers to the poetics of the lyrics of rock music. Rock'n'Roll brings a change immediately after the war. After a while, however, the new generations feel the need of lyrics that take into account the social context in which they live.

Bob Dylan begins his career with folk songs, later migrating to rock. His early albums are, as I mentioned, songs of protest. Dylan pays attention to his lyrics sometimes I might say, more to them than to the melody. For young Dylan, it was important what he said, not playing the guitar. The message of his songs alludes to something else, they are metaphorical, meaningful. Dylan uses rhyme, figures of speech, rhetorical questions. *Blowin' in the Wind* (1963) contains a number of questions addressed to every man, and the answers to those questions are like air, invisible yet present. Society must evolve to renounce wars, to stop making the same mistakes as in the past. The pacifist message crosses *the railway of time*, the song remains in *the station of soul* and in the universal consciousness.

Meanwhile, Dylan flirts with beatnik movement. Allen befriends Ginsberg and gradually their friendship turns into a successful partnership. For Dylan this led to the change he wanted later, from folk-style protest music, to rock music with poetical lyrics. Considered by the critics a song worthy of the status of poetry, *Like a Rolling Stone* (1965) proposes an allegory. The meanings of the lyrics refer to liberty and freedom from social norms of a society that begins to awaken from the American dream mirage. *Like a Rolling Stone* has the structure of a poem, especially since Dylan almost recites the song. Rhyme types are mixed intentionally, creating meanings, resulting, overall, a poem that can be recited in the absence of the melody.

A similar way of composing songs we encounter in Jim Morrison's lyrics. He was a fervent reader, but also a poet with books released before the

musical debut with The Doors. Morrison would write lyrics as poetry. *The End* (1966) is an incantation, in three parts, an inadmissible cryptic long song for those days (it has about 11 minutes), bearing a variety of ideas to interpretation. The lyrics seem to follow the stream of consciousness, creating the feeling of being composed on the spot, during the performance. They violate the rules of composition of the classical poetry and are closer to the Dadaist method. *The End* becomes a *happening*, that type of postmodern artistic representation that creates the illusion of an ad hoc artistic act. Similar is the *Celebration Of The Lizzard King* (1970) which became an obligatory live performance for the band. The musical poem contains many symbols, while in the background, musical instruments create an appropriate environment for the recitation. Morrison plays with the lyrics, but also with the public at his concerts. He militated for a spiritual awakening and for total liberation from the shackles of the society.

We found incantation in Jimi Hendrix's song *Voodoo Chile*. Although he did not have college studies like Morrison or poet friends, like Dylan did, Hendrix impressed not only with his guitar skills and musical ingenuity, but also with his lyrics composition. Hendrix has a few songs which seem detached from a postmodern poetry album. *You Can Hear happiness staggering on down the street, / footprints dress in red* to remind us Stanesco's lyrics: *curcubeu tăiat în două, /și auzul o-ntâlni/tocmai lângă ciocârlii*.

Voodoo Child and *Voodoo Chile (slight return)* invokes the spirits seeking for *absolute*. Black magic is the inspiration for these songs, but evil, black, hell are symbols that rock music has been able to exploit to the full, since the beginning.

Word-air is also *the symbol*. There are a number of recurring symbols in rock music. Most common are heaven, and especially hell. The association of rock music with resistance, revolt meant a return to the *Fallen Angel*, a symbol of absolute rebellion. Accused of Satanism, 60s and 70s bands from the United

States and Britain have struggled with social prejudices. Talking/singing about the devil meant that you're a fan of his. Or, many of the songs are simple warnings of the Evil in the world and the role man plays in spreading his deeds. *Sympathy For The Devil* by The Rolling Stones is inspired by Bulgakov's book *The Master and Margarita*; the devil is seen as a character who makes the world right and punishes the wicked. The Rolling Stones believes that evil arises in the absence of good. Lack of interest predisposes man to do evil. Iron Maiden launches a warning with their album from 1980, *Number Of The Beast*. The lyrics have as source of inspiration *The Revelation*, by John, specifically, the part that announces the coming of Satan on Earth. Using the concept of devil in rock music determined people to consider rockers Satanists. Some critics made great show of zeal, and *sought for devil in heaven*. *Stairway to Heaven*, a masterpiece of rock music, is interpreted as an ode to the devil after a priest played the song backwards (back-masking technique). We tend to believe that the song was misinterpreted. The message is positive and materializes as a spiritual awakening, a journey of ascension in the high spheres of knowledge of the soul. *And as we wind on down the road /Our shadows taller than our soul* are lyrics from the last part of the song and capture the initiatory path, but also the status of evolution of the soul. Heavily influenced by spiritualism (Jimmy Page was a fan of Aleister Crowley), Led Zeppelin included in their compositions literary elements from the books of J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*. Moreover, literary works were often the starting points of the song lyrics.

Iron Maiden have been noted not only by the lyrics where they talk about the devil, but also by the songs that had famous literary works as starting point. With a length of 13 minutes *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* tells the story of the old sailor, firstly put into verse by Samuel Coleridge. Iron Maiden lyrics retain the original sailor's curse: *Day after day, day after day, / we stuck nor breath nor motion / as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean*. Literature

inspires the music, but music transforms literature too. Through rock, new generations have contact with the work of Coleridge, of Bulgakov or they find out about Ulysses through Cream's songs, who take their inspiration from Homer's *Odyssey*. This time we deal with an Odysseus of the current times. Walking through the journey of life, modern man tries to find himself. But there are all kind of temptations in his way, including drugs: *How his naked ears were tortured by the sirens sweetly singing / Sparkling waves are calling you to touch her white laced lips*. The drugs were widely used by artists in the 60s, 70s, becoming sources of inspiration for finding deep meanings. Often, we find drugs metaphorically represented in songs, although artists have denied such interpretations. The Rolling Stones, in their song *Satisfaction: But he can't be a man 'cause he doesn't smoke / The same cigarettes as me*, the Beatles, *Let It Be: Mother Mary (marijuana) Comes to me / Speaking words of wisdom*.

Dylan also has some references to the drugs in the song *Mr. Tambourine Man: Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin' ship / My senses have been stripped, my hands can't feel to grip*, Hendrix in *Purple Haze: Purple Haze was in my brain, / lately things don't seem the same, / actin' funny but I don't know why / scuse me while I kiss the sky*.

Morrison was also a major consumer of prohibited substances. And he did not hesitate to hide it - in the chorus of *Break On Through (To The Other Side)* we find the lyrics: *Everybody loves my baby / Everybody loves my baby / She gets (high)* (last verse is repeated four times). *Stairway to Heaven* can be interpreted, in its turn, as an allusion to drugs trance. In most cases, artists still tried to conceal the use of substances and conveyed them to metaphors and allegories.

The four elements: *earth-music, water-music, air-word, fire-word* are key elements in the composition of those rock songs that acquired the status of art. The elements cannot be separated, although we have shown that there are a

few songs that can be read as poetry. The songs reach a maximum only when the four elements merge seamlessly. The present study sought to identify those parts common to all songs that acquire the status of art. For a painting, a text or a song to reach the *high notes of art*, it should be able to generate meanings and feelings endlessly. The rock music of the 60s, 70s, 80s from the Anglophone space has created some of the most successful songs, songs that will transcend time and space. *The Act Of Word In Rock Music* followed both *the art of words sliding in front of the melodic line*, and the musical notes and the chords used, with their contribution in supporting the message of the lyrics. Meanings, symbols, have been sought in a social, historical context, but they were also analyzed from within the text; After all, art is a generator of different interpretations, depending on the imagination of each lyrics critic.

The Act Of Word In Rock Music highlights the strength of the lyrics and the importance they have in rock songs. There is a tendency of rock and folk music, for reflection, for depth. The rock music listener of the 60s, 70s, 80s will want to let go with the flow, to live life - *Like A Rolling Stone*, not to be led by a binding system, not being just a puzzle piece of the system - *Another Brick In The Wall*, to be open to change - *The Times They are A-changin'*, to oppose war, even if he's not a *Fortunate Son* and evolve spiritually to the *Stairway to Heaven*.

The originality of this work consists in identifying, tracking and analyzing the act of speech in the context of the act of music. *Air-word* and *fire-word* are two terms created for a better understanding of how lyrics move toward *water-music* and *earth-music*, creating the artistic concept of rock music.

The originality also lies in reinterpreting of rock songs that have been appreciated by the public, critics and had an influence in art and society. The hermeneutical act meant an approach from both sides, music and literature, focusing on the meaning and the poetry of lyrics.