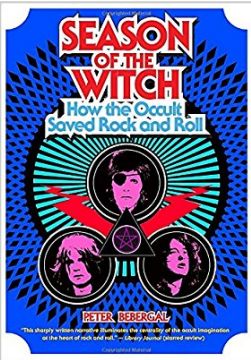

Season of the Witch: How the Occult Saved Rock and Roll

By Peter Bebergal

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From the hoodoo-inspired sounds of Elvis Presley to the Eastern odysseys of George Harrison, from the dark dalliances of Led Zeppelin to the Masonic imagery of today's hip-hop scene, the occult has long breathed life into rock and hip-hop—and, indeed, esoteric and supernatural traditions are a key ingredient behind the emergence and development of rock and roll.

With vivid storytelling and laser-sharp analysis, writer and critic Peter Bebergal illuminates this web of influences to produce the definitive work on how the occult shaped -- and saved -- popular music.

As Bebergal explains, occult and mystical ideals gave rock and roll its heart and purpose, making rock into more than just backbeat music, but into a cultural revolution of political, spiritual, sexual, and social liberation.

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Season of the Witch: How the Occult Saved Rock and Roll By Peter Bebergal Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #112851 in Books
- Brand: Tarcher
- Published on: 2015-10-13
- Released on: 2015-10-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .74" w x 6.00" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

Editorial Review

Review
“A fascinating thesis reflecting the time when everyone seemed to give rock and roll the status of, if not a religion, then certainly that of a spiritual belief system. Peter Bebergal’s ***Season of the Witch*** brought it all back. It's an absorbing read deserving an important place in rock literature.”
--Michael Moorcock

"Rather than turning in either a fanboyish rhapsody or a scholarly dissertation, he treads the line between those approaches. The result is passionate, informed, gripping and at times wonderfully lyrical."
--**NPR**

“This sharply written narrative illuminates the centrality of the occult imagination at the heart of rock and roll.”
--***Library Journal*** **(starred review)**

"A thoroughly researched, absorbing, entertaining ride for anyone who’s ever played the Beatles’ ‘White Album’ backwards.”
--**Andrea Shea, WBUR/ NPR**

“Kudos to Bebergal for taming the wily spirits of rock long enough to capture their essence in this fascinating book. Perhaps more impressive is the book’s comprehensiveness—from Delta blues to beatnik bluster to acid evangelists to metal overlords, ***Season of the Witch*** puts the hellfire in highbrow.”
--***The Contrarian***

"Skillfully woven...will delight any music fan and music historian in equal measure.”
--***Spirituality Today*** **(5/5 stars)**

“This book is a glorious headlong rush into the dark, full of the electricity of the arcane. I loved it.”
--Warren Ellis, author of *Gun Machine* and *Transmetropolitan*

“From grimoires to topographic oceans, from heavy metal to hip-hop, Peter Bebergal tracks the Mysteries through half a century of popular music (and some underground noise as well). At once an overview of rock's mystic rebellions and a handy primer on modern esoterica, ***Season of the Witch*** suggests that we may need to round out the trinity of sex, drugs, and rock' n' roll with an additional deity: the occult, another primal portal to a re-enchanted world.”
--Erik Davis, author of *Led Zeppelin IV* and *Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica*

“Told with clear-eyed scholarship and delectable anecdotes, Peter Bebergal's mind-expanding occult history opened my third eye to Rock & Roll's awesome power over human behavior. Rock & Roll will never sound the same to me again, and I'm glad about it.”
--Mark Frauenfelder, founder of *Boing Boing*

"Bebergal displays an intelligent understanding of the interaction between religion and culture when he argues that the "'occult imagination is the vital force of rock-and-roll culture.' "
--***Publishers Weekly***

“Peter Bebergal has written of his own searching, reconciling spiritual aspirations and personal background, in *The Faith Between Us* and *Too Much To Dream*. Both are on my bookshelves. Here, in ***Season Of The Witch***, Peter presents an overview of one “alternative influence” at work on some of those intending to change the world.

The world they hoped to change was a dangerous mess.

Now, half a century later…”
--Robert Fripp

“Unfussy but thoroughly documented…establishes the occult as a phenomenon above and beyond its debatable status of mere fad in the history of contemporary music.”--**Ralph Elawani, *Exclaim!***

“Anyone seeking shocking tales of demonic rock’n’roll would be best served looking elsewhere, but for someone interested in the interplay between music, culture and spirituality, *Season Of The Witch* is a revelatory and fascinating grimoire.” ***--Record Collector***

“A must-read for anyone who prefers their music loud, riff-driven, and loaded with lyrics about Satan, wizards, and mystical quests.” --**Cheryl Eddy, *io9.com***

“Bebergal, a Dungeons & Dragons playing rock fanboy and graduate of Harvard Divinity School has exactly the right pedigree for this line of work, infusing what could be a dry litany of rumors, hearsay, and matter-of-facts with a genuine love for the source material.” **--Cooper Berkmoyer, *Flavorpill***

About the Author
Peter Bebergal writes widely on the speculative and slightly fringe. His recent essays and reviews have appeared in *NewYorker.com,The Times Literary Supplement*, *Boing Boing*, *The Believer*, and *The Quietus*. He is the author of *Too Much to Dream: A Psychedelic American Boyhood* and *The Faith Between Us: A Jew and a Catholic Search for the Meaning of God* (with Scott Korb). Bebergal studied religion and culture at Harvard Divinity School, and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

INTRODUCTION

WE ARE ALL INITIATES NOW

I

In 1978 my older brother had just joined the air force, leaving me access to the mysteries of his room. The suburbs of southern Florida were row after row of single-level ranch houses and manicured lawns. I was eleven, filled with restless, inexplicable feelings. It was just before the dawn of puberty. Except for what I could glean from my brother’s dirty magazines, sex was still an abstraction. Some other secret thing was

beckoning. I had caught glimpses when I heard the music coming from his room, so different from my own small collection of Bay City Rollers and Bee Gees 45s. One by one, I began to play his records, holding the sleeves in my lap, trying to learn the grammar of this new musical language. I was not quite prepared for what I found. His music made me feel hot and cold at the same time, a small fire starting in my belly while shivers ran up my spine. Here was a seductive and impenetrable catalogue of arcane and occult symbols, of magic and mystical pursuits, of strange rituals involving sex, spaceships, and faeries. I went into his room looking to hear some real rock and roll. I came out spellbound and hypnotized by the spectacle.

The record collection was a lexicon of the gods: the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Arthur Brown, King Crimson, Hawkwind, Yes, Black Sabbath, and Pink Floyd. Already immersed in the arcana of the 1970s by way of J. R. R. Tolkien reprints, Dungeons & Dragons—almost universally known as D&D—*Heavy Metal* magazine, horror comics, and the animated films of Ralph Bakshi, I sat in long hours of deep listening, studying the lyrics, the album cover art, and even the hidden messages etched into the inner ring of the vinyl. I searched for the clues to Paul McCartney's rumored death and felt the chill of ghosts staring out from the cover of *Abbey Road*, the barefoot Beatle unwittingly symbolizing his own demise through some terrible necromancy. I held the vinyl of *Led Zeppelin III* up to the light so I could search for the fabled occult missive carved into the record's inner ring: "Do what thou wilt." I stared in nervous fascination at the various characters inhabited by David Bowie and tried to crack the mystery of his lyrics that told of aliens, Aleister Crowley, and supergods who are "guardians of a loveless isle." Black Sabbath was formed by sorcerers, working their dark art through heavy doom-laden riffs. Arthur Brown admitted he was the "god of hellfire."

The music became a fixture of my psyche. I thought I alone had uncovered a well of arcane truth, like the paperback *Necronomicon* that sat on my bookshelf. There was something both transcendent and abysmal lurking within the grooves of these records and the fantastic lives of the characters inhabiting them. Roger Dean's artwork on Yes albums were landscapes once populated by ancient races, their arcane wisdom lost, sunken like Atlantis. At the other end of the spectrum was the Beatles' impenetrable and terrifying penultimate song on the *White Album*, "Revolution 9," a spoken-word, feedback-infused collage of hidden occult messages suggesting a palpable violence. These often opposing qualities nonetheless shared a common thread: they referenced a reality beyond normal perception, a vast metaverse inhabited by demons and angels, aliens and ancient sorcerers, all of which could be accessed by potentially dangerous methods such as magic, drugs, and maybe even sex. But I also sensed the peril in reading too deeply into these songs and albums. The film *Helter Skelter*, often shown on the UHF channels' late-night movie programs, taught me that fixating on a band's life and work can sometimes take a fanatical turn. In this instance, an album helped to precipitate a murderous call to arms when Charles Manson believed the Beatles were sending him secret, violent messages through their music. Although the connection between the music and the murders was overblown, my adolescent self couldn't shake the feeling there *was something* to the Beatles' songs that made this kind of interpretation possible. And sure, it was crazy to think so and everyone knew it wasn't true, but maybe, just maybe . . . Paul really was dead.

Despite my ambivalence about my teenage fantasies, my brother's albums really were a glimpse into the sometimes explicit, sometimes hidden occult language of rock, a window into the pervasive influence of magic and mysticism on the most essential and influential art form of the twentieth century. Within a single collection representing a microcosm of rock history and styles was another hidden story, of how rock—its songs and its staging, its lyrics and its pyrotechnics—have been shaped by magical and mystical symbols, ideas, and practices.

Like many teenagers in those days, I wondered if magic really did exist outside the lists of spells in the D&D *Player's Handbook*. I bought books on white magic and lit candles, making sure the window was open so as to not alert my mother, who was ever on the lookout for the danger of an open flame. My friends and I dimmed the lights and hovered our fingers over the plastic planchette of my Ouija board. Nothing seemed to manifest. I could not pull out of thin air the potent feelings that came from those records. There was magic

here, but it was even bigger than I could have imagined. From between the gatefold covers, from the vinyl tucked snugly into the sleeves, an enchantment had been woven that bewitched all of popular culture.

I didn't know it then, but I was a participant in a vast cultural phenomenon. The Beatles had already converted an entire generation of listeners whose ideas about spirituality would be shaped by LSD, tarot cards, and free copies of the Bhagavad Gita handed out by young Hare Krishna devotees. As I listened to *Houses of the Holy* in my brother's room, Led Zeppelin had already shaped rock's imagination about the power of the magical arts. And only a few years earlier, progressive rock bands had fashioned dreams of inner and outer space, offering otherworldly hope at the closing of the Aquarian dream.

Rock had used a cloak of glamour in the original use of the word: an enchantment. *Glamour* is even related to the word *grammar*, which was sometimes used to denote occult language, the verbal weaving of a spell, and eventually became *grimoire*, a book of magic. Just as in stage magic, where the audience allows itself to be tricked, to be seduced by the illusion, rock and roll has fed off a similar instinct. A person's willingness to be tricked is how the palm reader plies the trade, the shaman hypnotizes the tribe, and why I listened to those songs and gazed at those album covers in wonder and excitement, certain I was unlocking a chamber where a magical artifact was hidden.

Those days sitting cross-legged on my brother's floor were an initiation into a mystery cult, where I would become a disciple of rock and roll. Throughout my teenage years, rock was the musical narrative of my inner life. There was always an album that spoke perfectly to whatever inscrutable feelings I was negotiating at the time. Rock's often sphinxlike truths were the key to not only my own inner life; they could open the door into other mysterious realms. Eventually I stopped searching for esoteric riddles on album covers and in song lyrics, but I never ceased being aware of where the occult imagination was at play. It's a plot I've been following ever since I first opened the gatefold cover to David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* album to the grotesquely erotic painting of a caninesque Bowie, half man, half dog. I came to realize that magic cannot exist without a conduit, a means of expression. And even if it can, I am not interested in the metaphysics of the occult. I believe in those horned gods only when I hear them speaking from out of the grooves in the vinyl, the shiny surface of a CD, and even in the sonic reduction of the MP3. And in those moments they are as real as the music itself. I don't need the magic to be anywhere else. It exists as the most potent spell in the awesome spectacle of rock and roll.

II

At pivotal moments in its development, rock musicians and their audiences together made an almost unconscious pact to expand their consciousness and push beyond the restraints of traditional American music and its underlying spiritual identity. The occult became rock's very salvation then, taking possession of the imagination of rock musicians and their fans, and redefining popular music and culture. Moreover, the occult imagination saved rock and roll from sugary teenybopper purgatory and urged musicians, engineers, and producers to look beyond the conventional toward the possibility of raising the collective spiritual consciousness into the astral planes. The occult imbued rock with an immortal soul that continues to resonate in Western culture, and musicians and their audiences continue to feed off one another, looking for deeper meaning as a way to make sense of the primal and ancient urges that rock and roll has always evoked.

Rock is the sound of both spiritual and musical rebellion, and for the long and continuing history of this most indispensable of musical forms, these two things have become inseparable. What is it about rock, more than any other art form of the modern age, that makes it such a perfect vehicle for this ancient and often unconscious drive to penetrate the veil between the phenomenal world and the numinous realm of the spirit? Why have so many musicians staged their rock concerts to appear as moments of shamanic and religious rites and created personas simulating magicians, demons, the gods Pan and Dionysus, even appearing as people possessed by gods or devils or worse? Why have they covered their album covers with images of the occult, conjured their lyrics out of the stuff of legend and myth, and even in their personal lives sought their

own mystical and magical experiences? Why have they performed shows in front of ancient relics?

Rock's spiritual affinity with occultism is due in large part to the nature of the occult itself. The occult—the popular term for a wide range of spiritual beliefs and activities concerned with supernatural, Gnostic, magical, and mystical ideas—operates within an unorthodox, nonconformist, and sometimes heretical temple, worshipping in ways at odds with the traditional and established religious order. These practices are an attempt by the individual or group to take a more active role in their own spiritual destiny, to commune with the divine through some form of intercession. Spirits, divination, amulets, charms, and even the worship of other deities feel direct and experiential.

This purposeful drive toward a divine encounter has surfaced in various manifestations throughout history and all over the world: in the Jewish mystics of medieval Europe, in the American Pentecostal Christians, and in the American appropriation of Buddhism and yoga. Christianity would often see this impulse as the work of the devil, even within its own ranks. Renaissance magicians and alchemists such as Giordano Bruno were called heretics, and later Lutheran and other American Christian sects would look on snake handlers and those who spoke in tongues as liars at best, devil worshippers at worst. In many cases, it was Christianity that perpetuated a belief in a pagan lineage through laws against magic and more active and often false accusations such as the infamous witch trials. The use of occult fears for political gains only prolonged superstitions and the other beliefs that religious authorities claimed to be trying to eradicate. Christianity would seal the pagan chamber completely, even as it defined itself by appropriating pagan myths such as the solstice and a resurrecting god. As the instinct for ecstatic experience continued to bubble up, it became by definition heterodox. The original intention of this kind of authentic practice, once organized around communities with rituals bordering on the theatrical and the hypnotic, was mostly lost.

Until rock and roll.

The phenomenon is modern, but rock's soul was burnished in the fires of ancient mystery cults, when myth and initiation were fused in a potent mix of dance, intoxication, and other forms of ecstatic revelry. But despite the spectacle of this kind of worship, it's still a simple human need being played out in theatrical ways: it's the desire for community, for myth and ritual, and for direct communion with the divine.

It's best to imagine the occult roots of rock as an estuary. While early rock and roll can be traced directly to the blues, gospel, and folk, rock's overall development was also shaped by jazz, experimental and early electronic music, and even classical strains. In each of these influences the occult is also present, often exhibiting the same characteristic: artists looking for ways to revolt against convention by using the occult as both an inspiration and a vehicle for their ideas. While rock is essentially a recent phenomenon, it does not exist in a vacuum of modern human experience. Rock is an aspect of the ancient impulse to hammer out sounds on whatever tools are available, to express what it means to be human. For millennia, making music has been inseparable from religious activity. Rock and roll's origins are in the blues and folk—forms of music deeply engrained with Christian traditions and values, but whose own roots grew in the soil where other gods were worshipped. As popular music developed, it struggled with this tension between Puritanism and the shadow of other non-Christian traditions that were just as much a part of American music.

Just as religious traditions have always sought to make sense of their own pagan origins—usually by prohibiting and demonizing the old gods—ministers, parents, and record-burning mobs saw in rock the threat of sex and chaos. Rock's response was its true salvation: musicians pushed out further, conjuring spirits with power chords. When rock was finding its electric sound and its hormonal teenage audience, it chose sex as its expression of agitation. This was its first claim to autonomy, a wriggle of the hips in the face of the religious hierarchy. As rock critic Dan Graham explains: "Rock turned the values of traditional religion on their head. To rock 'n' roll meant to have sex . . . NOW." Because the mainstream church often saw sex as a symptom of ungodliness and the influence of evil spirits, rock musicians felt the good burn of rebellion as they plugged in their amps, calling out to a greater salvation than Christian redemption: "When the chimes

ring five, six, and seven, / We'll be right in seventh heaven."

Rock's erotic tension gave it the label of devil's music, its very soul seen as having been burnished in the fires of one of the first sins: human sexual awareness. Rock's first words were sexual, drawn from deeply explicit blues lyrics and the very physicality of its rhythms, themselves arising out of ancient soil. As the American slaves were developing their own form of Christianity that used song as the essential form of worship, they tread carefully even as they incorporated African tribal music and movement. Slaves would shuffle around in a circle, calling out and shaking in the throes of religious ecstasy, but their feet had to remain on the floor, lest they be accused of turning their precise religious devotion into the most profane pastime: dancing. Unless it is glorifying God, music is profane and solicits dancing, one of the most sexually charged pastimes. And where sex is, the devil is winking nearby.

Fear is a funny thing, though. It often titillates and strengthens the rumors and stories that engender it. We want to feel afraid, and the supernatural and the occult have long provided a tempting morsel, particularly with people and things that defy convention or place themselves outside the mainstream. People have long believed music contained some enchanted attributes, something that could electrify the listener as well as the player. Rumors of the occult, particularly stories of deals with the devil, both attract and repel. The famed early nineteenth-century violinist Paganini was believed by peasants to be possessed by the devil for his masterful and ecstatic playing of Satan's favorite instrument. During a concert in Vienna, one audience member was said to have seen the devil actually standing next to Paganini, guiding his fingers along the strings. Rumors of Paganini selling his soul to the devil did not keep devout Italian Catholics away from his music. While it a took a mental toll on the musician, who wanted to be recognized for his own talent, it added to his reputation and increased the size of audiences at his concerts.

There was also a deeply racist subtext in Christian leaders' reign of fire against rock music. Rock's earliest manifestations drew directly from the blues, gospel, and even African American spirituals, all of these seen as incarnations of the perceived barbarism and ungodliness of black Americans, many of whom it was believed had sinister intentions regarding the white daughters of America.

Rock musicians had still not given it an explicit name, using sex as a means of spiritual transgression until the planets aligned in the 1960s and sexual liberation, antiwar protests, and other social movements collided. In this climate, musicians and fans alike would blow their music and their minds with LSD, opening up a cultural third eye exposing them to alternative religious and occult practice. It was a shot heard round the world in song, such as the spirituality of the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows," one the first great mystical moments in popular music. By the 1970s the word *occult* had become fairly well attached to the then burgeoning New Age movement, which attempted to draw, from various beliefs and practices, an all-inclusive spiritual tool kit for the masses. "Take what you need and leave the rest" was the note attached to the inner lid of Pandora's box, in which you could find mantras, crystals, tarot cards, a smattering of magic by way of the Kabbalah and Wicca, quantum physics, ancient aliens, all wrapped in a cloth of cosmic mysticism. New Age and the occult became mostly synonymous in popular culture. Until the word *occult* was dropped, New Age often summoned up a darker spirit, such as Satan worshippers, strange sex rituals, and black magic. Now the term "New Age" invokes images of angelic messengers and the piano pecking of George Winston.

All the essential rock genres, from heavy metal to progressive, from glam to goth, gathered their wool from the occult's harvest. Magic and mysticism gave rock its sure footing even as it took the greatest leap of faith and plunged into the abyss. It could have gone another way and become merely a fusion of American blues and folk without its own real identity. Instead, the biggest names in popular music willingly participated in this spiritual rebellion and in so doing crafted rock's mythic soul. The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, King Crimson, Black Sabbath, Yes, and even the Rolling Stones, among many others, not only transformed rock with their musical innovations, but saved rock from becoming a series of radio-friendly 45s spinning out endless redundant chords.

These bands transmitted an ancient echo that is an essential part of human culture and expression, an imperative to reach beyond convention and strain to hear the music of the spheres. All of popular culture was triggered. Even producers and DJs were forced to rethink what was sellable, and soon found a willing audience pouring money into the music industry. And even when the musicians themselves insisted it was all just a marketing game, they helped carve out a pop culture mythology.

To describe how the occult imagination is the vital force of rock and rock culture, I will engage in a series of narratives. The true conversion didn't happen overnight. There is no single album or performance that serves as a lodestar. There have been many musicians who perfectly possess the spirit of the old gods, but are not necessarily representative of the occult current being traced here. Jim Morrison was called an "electric shaman" by the media and his fans. Morrison's stage performances were hypnotic, and at points he seemed to be inhabited by the spirit of a Native American shaman. In the 1970s, Patti Smith would take on the mantle when her friend William Burroughs said Smith is "a shaman . . . someone in touch with other levels of reality." Other examples abound, and while they help cast a wide net over the subject, they are blips, shiny objects leading into Alice's rabbit hole. In a photograph taken by his then bandmate Andy Summers, Sting is lying with his arm draped over his forehead, looking into the hidden distance, a paperback copy of an unnamed Aleister Crowley book tucked under his other hand. The black-and-white photo is compelling, a glimpse into the offstage interests of a musician. The photo was published in a collection titled *Throb*, in 1983, just as the Police were coming out of the storm of their chart-topping album *Ghost in the Machine* and releasing *Synchronicity*. The pop darling Daryl Hall insisted on recording *Sacred Songs*, an album inspired by Aleister Crowley—particularly the book *Magick Without Tears*—a musical release that would almost cost Hall a label contract as well as his professional and personal relationship with his partner, John Oates. The progressive rock band Tool has incorporated ritual magic, sacred geometry, and other esoteric practices into their recording sessions and live shows. These are all effective illustrations, and they are also a clue as to how vast a subject rock and roll and the occult really is.

It would be futile to list every album employing a pentagram, a devil's visage, a sigil, or some other mystical or occult symbol; to name every song that references wizards and warlocks, devils and demons, tarot cards and fortune-tellers, karma, past lives, alien saviors, or Aleister Crowley; to examine every musician that has ever dabbled in the occult. What I have opted for instead is a narrative history, drawing on key moments in the development of rock and roll, from its origins in African American slave songs up until the ascendancy of electronic instruments in the 1980s. Along the way, some well-known names will make an appearance, and among them some lesser-known ones will rear their heads. The hope is by focusing on particular musicians and bands at certain moments in time, a larger narrative will emerge. My aim is not to upend or challenge the accepted history of rock (in all its various permutations) but to show that weaving in and out of the most important moments of rock's development is the occult, the central thread that, if pulled out, would unravel the whole intricate design.

I also hope to reveal that these musicians are human after all and their magical and mystical aspirations are a microcosm of a greater American spiritual hunger. But there is dark paradox here. Many artists saw their lives turned upside down by fame and excess. The occult provided a grammar through which to make sense of their almost inexplicable lives. These are the tales of musicians and magicians, rock fans and rock's detractors, the light shining from a creative spiritual quest and the darkness finding its way in when mixed with drugs and fame. These stories serve as a window exposing how without the occult imagination there would be no rock as we know it.

III

There is no satisfactory definition of the occult, especially since the term carries so much baggage. Believers in certain occult ideas will often claim there is a direct transmission from the ancients in the way of coded writings, mediums, and even aliens. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, for example, is an Egyptian collection of texts dating to around the second or third century, a synthesis of Gnostic Christianity, Neoplatonism, and Greek

and Roman cultic myths. The texts contain alchemical, magical, and astrological teachings, but at their heart, they describe a universe where human beings are divine and unity with God is the true destiny of creation. The *Corpus* has found its way into any number of occult and magical teachings, such as the popular idea often expressed as “so above, so below.” During the Renaissance it was attributed to a named figure, Hermes Trismegistus. It’s likely the character was an invented, albeit brilliantly conceived, combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian deity Thoth, both messenger gods who enjoy writing and magic.

Nevertheless, many modern-day adherents of the *Corpus* claim, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that these texts were written by one sage belonging to a single ancient-Egyptian mystery cult. Others have tried to prove witchcraft was part of an actual religious lineage that began in the ancient world and spread through Europe, eventually landing in modern-day Wiccan and neo-pagan communities. Unfortunately, there is no direct path for the occult as a belief. It twisted and turned through the ages, seemingly disappearing entirely, only to spring up when people once again sought something—some meaning or experience—that the Church or other religious authorities could not provide.

On the other side are the detractors who claim the occult is not to be taken seriously, especially in an age when science and reason have all but made religion, and any beliefs in the supernatural, irrelevant. Particularly for those who think religion is something with no value, the occult has even less, being something more akin to superstition: an irrational, silly trend. Religion at least has shaped civilizations and culture. The religious imagination bore the music of Bach, the Sistine Chapel, and even *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. For good or ill, it’s something to be reckoned with. But the occult is a distraction for dreamy-eyed New Agers and stoned teenage metal heads. The occult is even more of a fool’s game than religion.

A more balanced definition is one that takes into account the remarkable influence occult beliefs have had on culture while also recognizing that these beliefs are themselves a conglomerate of bits of mythology, religion, and actual experience, which often take the form of mystical or other states of altered consciousness. Despite its darker connotation, the occult is merely a set of practices and beliefs—some stretching back to antiquity, others of a more recent vintage—that attempt to understand reality (spiritual or otherwise) in a way traditional religious practice cannot or chooses not to explore. More often than not, occult practices are in direct response to traditional religious practice and derive their language and beliefs from those practices. In this respect then, the occult is a spectrum of beliefs and actions seeking to understand God, nature, or the cosmos in a way at odds with normative or mainstream religious communities. These practices attempt to place some measure of control into human hands. The gods are too fickle, and evil too ever present. A charm over a door to ward off malevolent spirits might work even better than a prayer. Even mainstream religious communities used occult methods, even as they sought to outlaw them. The gargoyles of Notre Dame and other cathedrals, for example, are wards, willful attempts to trick devils into believing these locations are already occupied by their kind and to go looking for some other place to infest.

The occult has also found expression in art, music, and literature. I would argue that these things, more than any magical ceremony in a lodge or grove, are the surest and possibly most authentic expressions. Occult and esoteric religious ideas have long held the fascination of artists. In the late 1800s there was what is called the Occult Revival when a number of artists, society people, and intellectuals were joining magical fraternities (the poet W. B. Yeats and the Welsh writer Arthur Machen were both members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn). The Symbolist art movement of that time was deeply inspired by occult symbolism such as the Renaissance-period alchemical emblems used by magicians to meditate on occult ideas through a complex system of signs they believed activated the spiritual center of the magus. The early twentieth-century artist Austin Osman Spare would go on to become an influential magician, having devised his own system of what is known as sigil magic, an extension of his artwork. It was composers and musicians, however, who defied convention by seeking nontraditional (often non-Christian) spiritual ideas and experiences that aligned with their musical innovations. The composer friends Erik Satie and Claude

Debussy both joined the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose-Cross, a mystical fraternity. This would extend into the midcentury, particularly with experimental composers. Pierre Schaeffer, the father of musique concrète, was a devotee of the Russian mystic George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. The electronic music vanguard Karlheinz Stockhausen studied Eastern mysticism and once claimed he received his musical education in the Sirius star system.

It makes more sense, then, to talk about the occult imagination rather than the occult purely as a belief system. The occult imagination may express itself as magical ritual, but it is just as likely to express itself as symbolic elements in art. Moreover, the occult imagination is at work when something is perceived as being driven by supernatural purpose, as in the case of a Christian televangelist finding devilish intent in a rock band's lyrics. The ground on which intention and perception get conflated is where culture is created. Rock and roll is the fertile soil where this landscape has flowered and grown in remarkable ways. And it is here the occult becomes a metaphor for resisting customs, for challenging the status quo, and for staking a claim for individuals taking control of their own destinies, often in the face of extreme cultural homogenization. If the occult is a current needing a river to take it to the oceans of the world, then rock is the raging waterway that made it possible. And rock found in the occult imagination a sure spiritual partner that could help it defy convention.

What is needed, then, is a grand story, the story that represents the archetypes that rock so beautifully encapsulates. Having a story act as an overarching metaphor also helps to steer this examination toward myth and away from metaphysics. While I will need to discuss things like gods and demons, divination and devils, magic and UFOs, I make no claims about the reality of these things, only that they are powerful ideas that persist, and, for reasons I hope to establish, have found a particularly potent mode of expression in rock music. So to guide my hand away from any kind of claim for or against the occult, I will keep one of the great myths close by.

IV

The last thing you want to do is anger the god of madness, but this is exactly what the prince of Thebes had done. Dionysus had come to the great city with his female entourage, the maenads. The charismatic god of wine and ecstasy was in Thebes to avenge the reputation of his mother, Semele, as well as the dismissal of his own divine origins. Dionysus is called the "god who arrives." No matter how you might try to avoid, ignore, or otherwise banish him, he will appear in your midst eventually. Many years before, Zeus—ever on the lookout for mortals to bed—took Semele as his lover. Semele gossiped with her sisters about her energetic lovemaking with Zeus. If he really was a god, they teased, he should prove it. Semele, embarrassed and maybe a little doubtful herself, begged Zeus to reveal his true nature. He refused, saying that she could not withstand being in the presence of an unclothed divine being. So Semele put off his advances until the frustrated god gave her what she asked. She was incinerated on the spot. But Semele was pregnant, and at the moment of her immolation, Zeus plucked the baby from her womb and sewed it into his thigh to one day be born as Dionysus.

Semele's family came to live in Thebes where her sister Agave's son Pentheus was king. When Dionysus entered the city, he quickly possessed his aunt Agave and her sisters, turning them into bacchante, wild women who fled from the city into the hills to dance with the maenads, satyrs, and Dionysus himself. The king rebuked them and outlawed the worship of Dionysus. The god himself, disguised as one of his own priests, was promptly arrested. Pentheus mocked him, but over the course of their conversation, the cracks began to show. Pentheus appeared to be obsessed with the orgiastic rites of the maenads and the bacchante even as he spat on their beliefs. Dionysus advised Pentheus to spy on the women to learn their secret rituals and better know his enemy; the deity also suggested that the king dress as a woman to mingle among the maenads and the bacchante. Pentheus was stirred into a flurry of excitement; he dressed in drag and made his way outside the city to where the women were dancing. But they saw him for who he was and tore him apart, his own mother taking his head, believing it to be a lion, the final curse on the house of Semele's family.

This telling of the Dionysus myth is largely taken from the ancient Greek play *The Bacchae* by Euripides, a piece of literature often used to demonstrate the relationship between religious ritual and theater. And what is rock if not theater, particularly in the moments that reshaped and ultimately solidified the mythos of popular music. Theater is where gender easily becomes fluid, and like Pentheus, who eagerly masquerades in drag to witness the god's beautiful frenzy, rock musicians warped and weaved their sexuality. It can be seen in Robert Plant's masculine gracefulness, David Bowie's hermaphroditic aliens, Mick Jagger's tumescent lips, and Patti Smith's binary swagger.

Rock also taps into the Dionysian principle in its tragic forms. Pentheus secretly wants to participate in the secret rites, but he is not properly initiated. He wants the thrill without the sacrifice, but the god demands it, and so Pentheus is destroyed. This is rock's perpetual misfortune, where the lure of the ecstatic—often by way of intoxication—resulted in various forms of tragedy, including madness and death.

It's in the Dionysian intoxicating madness that the human drive for creative freedom was born and where rock would one day derive its essential vitality. The archetype of Dionysus reveals that the earliest roots of rock and roll's spirit are pagan at its core. Rock channels, through some mechanism of the unconscious (or maybe it really is magic after all), the faces of the old gods—of Dionysus and even others such as Pan and Hecate—of the mystery cults, where libation and dance are the vehicles through which one worships and experiences transcendence. So it is Dionysus haunting these proceedings—not a god one chooses to worship lightly. He is a god who will demand that you twist and shout your way across the hills, banging on your drum or whatever instrument is at hand. Don't worry if the music is any good or not. All it has to be is loud enough to annoy the neighbors. They might even peek out their windows to see what all the noise is about, and maybe even let their hair grow long and join the revelry.

CHAPTER 1

(YOU MAKE ME WANNA) SHOUT

I

If you want to learn to play guitar, find a crossroads and wait there at midnight. If you are patient, "a large black man" will emerge from the gloom. It could be Papa Legba, a Haitian deity whose strange origins lie in the religion known as vodou. Legba is the guardian of the spirit world, and you must first treat him with respect if you expect to gain any favor from the *orisha*, the spirits who are expressions of the creator god. It could also be Eshu, a West African Yoruba god who is a messenger, trickster, and the guardian of pathways. He will take your guitar and tune it in such a way so when you play it, you will be gifted with a preternatural power to play the blues. If you tell someone about it, they will surely think you unwittingly sold your soul to the devil, for who else would seemingly bestow you with such a momentous gift without actually asking for anything in return? When your time comes, they will tell you, you must answer to Old Scratch himself. But they would be wrong. It's not the devil who waits at the crossroads. In their long journey from Africa to the southern United States, Legba and Eshu slowly transformed into something sinister, warping the dark trickster gods at the spiritual source of the blues and later fighting for their rightful place as rock and roll looked to them for its own wild designs.

The legend of musicians selling their souls at the crossroads has become the creation myth for the popular association of rock with the occult. It is typically attributed to the life and legend of one young man; the poor, black Robert Johnson, whose influence on rock and roll is unsurpassed, was said to have made the deal that would give him uncanny proficiency on the guitar but would also doom him to a death at the age of twenty-seven. The story of Johnson meeting the devil has become popular music's stock parable for a Faustian bargain that ultimately ends in disaster. Curiously, the original story was likely not about Robert Johnson at all, but about the Mississippi blues singer Tommy Johnson. He sang in a ghostly falsetto that

suggested otherworldliness, and he fostered this by putting out the rumor that he'd received his vocal gift from the devil at a crossroads, a story perpetuated by his brother LeDell and pulled deep into the history and mythology of the blues.

The crossroads legend, despite its pervasiveness, is merely symptomatic of a deeper occult strain swimming in the undercurrent of rock and roll. Despite the story not originating with Robert Johnson, the legendary guitarist was still wading in a bayou of voodoo and Christianity. One of Johnson's most well-known songs, "Cross Road Blues," makes no mention of the devil, but it was believed to be his confessional that something happened to him at the devil's favored location. Most scholars and critics now agree that the song is about something just as common as the devil: riding the rail in search of better luck and a less baleful fate. Nevertheless, Johnson was still part of a culture knee-deep in a swamp of superstition.

The devil is often a stand-in for any non-Christian deity that might pose a threat to the conventional Judeo-Christian narrative, and it was no different in the American South in the hundred years or so leading up to the time of Robert Johnson and the blues. It began in 1820 when a Yoruban by the name of Ajayi was captured by the Fulani people, who had come to dominate much of West Africa in the nineteenth century. It was common practice for Africans to sell other tribal people into slavery, and Ajayi was only thirteen years old when he found himself bound in chains on a ship heading to Portugal. A ship belonging to a British antislave group stopped the Portuguese vessel and was able to secure the rescue of the captured Africans on board, who were then taken to Sierra Leone, where antislavery Christians had begun to gather and settle. There, the young man was exposed to a Christian missionary and soon converted. He was mentored in the church by Samuel Crowther (whose name he adopted as his own), ordained in 1843, and later became a missionary himself. And what better place to begin than in his homeland, where he knew the people, the customs, and the language?

To make sure his message would be well received, Samuel Ajayi Crowther began work on a translation of the Bible into the Yoruban tongue. But there were challenges. Crowther wanted the new Bible to feel Yoruban. Afraid it might appear as an alien text, he made sure it embraced the authentic culture of the Yoruban people. To this end, Crowther also borrowed from the Yoruban religion and in so doing shaped the culture of American music and preserved something he had hoped to eliminate. For the Yoruban people, there was no word corresponding to the biblical word for Satan or the devil. So Crowther chose the name for the Yoruban deity who had similar characteristics, at least from a nineteenth-century Christian viewpoint: it would be Eshu, the trickster god of the crossroads.

The consequences of Crowther's shell game were immense. Given that the beliefs of African religion were transmitted orally, it would be impossible to trace exactly what route this new Eshu-in-devil's-clothing would take in the journey across the Atlantic, but if we follow the religion's beliefs overall, eventually we are sure to find him waiting at the crossroads somewhere in the American South. By the time we get there, though, Satan has taken his place.

Eshu first appears outside of Africa as the *orisha* known as Legba in Haiti. Here, the African slaves practiced vodou, a tradition blending the religion of the Fon people of West Africa known as vodun with the French Catholicism of their masters. Vodun and the Yoruba religion share some essential features, not the least of which is the figure of this trickster deity that acts as an intermediary between this world and the spirits. As for Catholicism, this brand of Christianity made perfect sense to a people who saw their own spirits performing the same function as saints; intercessors who could be prayed to for various human needs, such as curing illness, changing the course of luck gone bad, or even exorcising other ill-tempered entities. And like the *orisha*, Catholic saints each have their own symbol, often a plant, animal, or something akin to a charm or amulet. In fact, saints were combined with various African spirits based on the similarities of their symbolic objects.

During the thirteen-year-long Haitian revolution of French slaves from 1791 to 1804, vodou was the spiritual

heart of the revolt, and many believed the magic of their homeland would empower them. Numerous freed blacks, slaves, and slave owners fled to Louisiana and helped to increase the already swelling black population. The complex aspects of vodou intermingled with the stew of other beliefs and practices, including Evangelical Christianity, occult practices molded out of the Yoruba religion, and European superstitions. Together these elements would come to be popularly known as voodoo.

Even before the slaves brought vodun to Louisiana, the African deities had already begun their decline as important intermediaries with the transcendent creator god in Yoruba (known as Olorun) to devils and even Satan himself. The Western view of African religion was filtered through fear and racism. Even those who considered themselves scientists viewed their subjects as though studying a strange nonhuman creature. In 1849, David Christy, a member of the American Colonization Society, gave a lecture to the Ohio House of Representatives titled “A Lecture on African Colonization,” in which he argues against the slave trade and proposes instead to “civilize and Christianize Africa.” Whenever the chance arises, Christy refers to their beliefs as superstitious and barbaric, in need of Christian cleansing. Between the subtle psychological conflation of the African trickster god with the Christian devil, as well as the deliberate attempt to paint African religion as backward, it is no surprise that for African Americans there was a troubled negotiation between their newly adopted Christianity and stories and folktales that survived from Africa. Music became the location where the lines were clearly drawn. Inside the church is the music of a promised salvation; outside the church the devil lurks. In the American South, it was difficult to separate the devil from those traditions that had been passed along, so while certain occult practices continued, the real magic was spread through whispers and gossip. Like all occult phenomena, tracing what was actually practiced as opposed to what was rumored can be difficult.

In the American South, people spoke in hushed tones about conjurers, spells, and gris-gris—small bags containing objects such as pubic hair or bone that served as talismans—and they may even have paid someone to cast a luck charm or to help ward off evil. Their Christianity did not preclude people from accepting there was power in another kind of belief, even though such practices would be intolerable within the actual church community. Voodoo also offered a direct and unmediated way to try and change one’s conditions. In his masterful book *Slave Religion,* Albert J. Raboteau explains why conjure (magic) was so attractive to the slave despite, for example, the Christian prohibition against it: “Not only was conjure a theory for explaining the mystery of evil, but it was also a practice for doing something about it.” The post–Civil War South continued to see voodoo practices, but it is likely many African Americans didn’t call it by name. Folk beliefs become so familiar, and so habitual, they can seem mundane, just parts of living requiring attending to.

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