

In her book, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, political writer Barbara Ehrenreich, after chronicling the history of the “repression of collective joy” (the joy experienced through the common peoples’ annual or seasonal festive gatherings, such as May Day) at the hands of both church and state during the medieval and premodern periods, takes up its modern liberation near the end of the book in a chapter she entitled: “The Rock Rebellion.” This chapter #10 is extremely significant to the Gypsy Scholar because Ehrenreich has fulfilled his on-going understanding of the nature and meaning of the Sixties Counterculture’s rock music by providing a historical background to it and then enabling the GS to situate it in terms of *how a popular-culture phenomenon can be a catalyst for sociopolitical change*. In short, Ehrenreich’s book lends authority to the Gypsy Scholar’s notion of what he terms “the politics of Eros.”

In this brief paper, the GS will pick out certain passages in the book, particularly in the chapter “The Rock Rebellion,” that discuss the Sixties Counterculture and its folk-rock and rock music in order to make the case stated above. As a preface to her cogent analysis, the GS offers this final paragraph from Ehrenreich’s “Introduction” to her book, one which demonstrates that the chapter, “The Rock Rebellion,” was the full development of her presenting the history of “collective joy” (or “communal pleasure”); that it is in anticipation of where she

was ultimately headed with her analysis and not a mere personal anecdote to her “Introduction:”

As I ventured into the less destructive kinds of festivities that concern us here, I recognized emotional themes I had encountered decades ago, at rock concerts, informal parties, and organized “happenings.” I suspect that many readers will have similar points of reference—whether religious or “recreational”—for the material in this book, and will be willing to ask with me: If we possess this capacity for collective ecstasy, why do we so seldom put it to use?

After discussing the long history of the “repression of collective joy” from the medieval and premodern periods by both church and state, which resulted in having the annual and seasonal festivals (or carnivals)—festivals, like May Day, increasingly manifesting a political edge or even serving, as time went on, as staging grounds for spontaneous political insurrection—banned or severely tamed as “spectacles of audience immobility,” Ehrenreich comes to see that the liberation from this kind of social repression was finally accomplished in the 1960s with the appearance of the Counterculture and its festive, ecstatic music:

Within a generation after the mass rallies of the 1930s and ‘40s, young people in the heart of the postfestive Western world would rebel against the immobility required of the ‘audience’ and, against all expectation, begin to revive the ancient tradition of ecstatic festivity.

Ehrenreich develops this perspective—based upon shamanic and Dionysian ecstatic traditions—on the Sixties Counterculture to

also see it as a revival of the festive tradition of carnival. Citing the influential anthropologist Victor Turner (who, despite his irritation with the hippie lifestyle of irresponsibility, admits the positive feature of what he terms “*communitas*”:

“‘mind-expanding’ drugs, ‘rock’ music, and flashing lights ... to establish a ‘total’ communion with one another,” and who imagined that ‘the ecstasy of spontaneous *communitas*’ could be prolonged into a routine condition”) she is able to put this in terms of the liberation from the dominant structures Western civilization, which makes the point about how the Counterculture’s rock music was much more than mere entertainment—*it was also a (“carnavalesque”) sociopolitical rebellion:*

In one way, the critics were right: Rock was much more than a musical genre; it was becoming, by the mid-1960s, the rallying point of an alternative culture utterly estranged from the dominant “structures,” as the anthropologist Victor Turner would term them, of Government, Corporations, Church, and Family. Spilling out of theaters, rock drew the fans to more expansive and congenial venues—“psychedelic ballrooms” lit by mind-dissolving strobe lights, and the outdoor sites of rock festivals from Monterey to Woodstock. In these settings, young people began to assemble all the ancient ingredients of carnival. . . .

Ehrenreich adds that “The counterculture’s dream of an ongoing ecstatic community” (termed the “Edenic fantasy”) means that “rock is clearly a cultural expression and instrumentality of that style of *communitas* which has arisen as the antithesis of the ‘square,’ ‘organization man’ type of bureaucratic social structure

of mid-twentieth-century America” and then concludes that

Rock and roll reopened the possibility of ecstasy, or at least a joy beyond anything else the consumer culture could offer. Drugs, particularly marijuana and LSD, contributed to the revival of the ecstatic possibility . . . .

Therefore, with the help of Ehrenreich, the GS understands the significance (in historical perspective) that the 1960’s Counterculture blurred of the lines between rock concerts (such as the musical “Be-Ins” and 1967 “Summer of Love”) and political demonstrations. (Thus, the question concerning such blurring: Is this a rock concert or a political rally?) As for political rallies and demonstrations in general, there was the incorporation of music, dance, street theater, and performance art. Given all this, the GS has come to believe that the Counterculture way of doing politics—the “politics of Eros”—represented the latest instance in a long history of what some social historians see as *the propensity low, popular culture has as a catalyst for political change.*