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Reading Whitman, Growing Up Rock 'n' Roll

On the 150th anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*, I have a confession to make: I wonder whether Whitman would be a poet in the 21st century. I try to picture him in an MFA classroom, his salutations and self-reference left on the workshop floor, and I invariably conclude that if he were alive today, old Walt would be playing rock 'n' roll. Whether as a solitary singer or the leader of a band, he'd wish to command the stage with the same sweaty genius as the guitar heroes who now inhabit the persona he created many years ago. For a poet who dreamed of pressing close to his audience and possessing their very best, rock 'n' roll would have been a natural and satisfying cultural development. "I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us," Whitman told his readers in 1855; "I pass so poorly with the paper and types. . . . I must pass with the contact of bodies." More than any of its aesthetic counterparts, rock revels in the kind of intimate, bodily sympathy Whitman envisioned between his audience and himself, and perhaps only rock has made that vision a tangible, public reality.

In contrast to Gatsby's green light, always receding before him into the past, Whitman seems to advance into a future that infinitely emanates from him. He is a virtual Rorschach test for generational experiences and values. At different points in the 19th and 20th centuries he has been a prophet of cosmic consciousness and a messiah of the natural world. He has been a good, gray wound dresser, a flag-waving patriot, and a heroic, working-class bard. We have known Whitman the champion of liberal democracy and Whitman the imperial self, the voice of American hegemony saluting those who submit to his force. Alongside these portraits, there is the Whitman of the body, the man of forbidden pleasures and desires, the great patriarch of homosexual

politics and verse. But the multitudes contained in Whitman extend beyond the identities supported by his work. Whitman's poems established a cultural aesthetic that springs from poetry but strangely enough is not beholden to it. As Kenneth Price has discussed in *To Walt Whitman, America*, writers such as John Dos Passos and William Least Heat-Moon have credited Whitman with introducing them to new ways of seeing the world. The filmmaker D. W. Griffith said that he would rather have written a single page of *Leaves of Grass* than have made his entire oeuvre of films. Bryan Garman has shown that the folk musician Woody Guthrie patterned his heroic "ballad singer" after the poet who emerged from the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. As Guthrie wrote, "He walks across political lines, color lines, conventional and superstitious lines, the lines of jealousy and blind hate, and . . . reaches a place in every person that no other sort of person can reach, and learns things which no other sort of worker nor scientist can reach, not even the family doctor nor the priest nor preacher can reach, no, not even the union organizer." If we can see Whitman's cultural aesthetic in the socialist novel, the Hollywood camera, and the dusty harmonica of a rambling troubadour, then why not the pounding energy of rock 'n' roll?

With the exception of television, no cultural influence in the last forty years has been as powerful and pervasive as popular music. Across a startling range of forms and styles—heavy metal, hip-hop, emo, rhythm and blues, glam, jam, grunge, and punk (to name just a few)—the music has shaped everything from our fantasies to our sexuality to the way we express emotional conflict. (How much rage has been sublimated through the recordings of the Who, the Sex Pistols, and Tupac Shakur?) This is especially true for young people whose choice of music has traditionally conveyed not just fleeting emotions but deep personal values. From the Vietnam War to the struggle against apartheid, rock has proven to be an especially good agent for raising social consciousness because it is so effective in altering its listeners' conceptions of self. With unstudied brilliance, it replicates the promise, quite familiar to readers of Whitman and Emerson, that artists will bring about an awakening in the audience, that their public works will take on a highly personal significance. "A great poem," Whitman wrote in 1855, "is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning." More than any of its cultural competitors—television programs, films, paintings, sculpture, symphonies, plays, and books—rock has become the predominant cultural setting for the testing and assertion of identity. Young men and women approach their music with the ardent seriousness of play, selecting each recording as if it conveyed something ineffable about themselves. In his famous "Calamus" cluster, Whitman suggested that he had left "faint clews and indirections" for his readers, hoping that their interest in his mysterious personality would result in a reformation of their own. Roughly one hundred

years later, rock 'n' roll emerged, and within a decade, its fans were studying album covers and parsing lyrics in a remarkable conflation of self-discovery and hero worship.

It is of course customary to speak of rock's most talented lyricists as poets—so effective their lyrics are in capturing a wide range of emotional experience. And there are plenty of songwriters whom critics have described as literary because their songs reveal a familiarity with the world of books. The problem with the label "rock poet" is that it suggests that the music needs to be dressed up in order to be taken seriously; poetry becomes a kind of fancy pants affixed to the naked loins of rock 'n' roll. Whitman would have had little interest in the term, for particularly in the first decade of his career, he was disinclined to view his poems as a culturally authoritative art. The preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* makes clear that poetry comes not from the parlor but from the street. It tells readers that they must "stand up for the stupid and crazy," that they must "go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families" if their bodies are to become poems themselves. Poetry comes not from the library, not from universities, but from the public association of stevedores, mechanics, prostitutes, and runaway slaves. Rather than a music that pretended to be poetry, Whitman would want a poetry informed by the music of workers singing about themselves.

Writing in the *Broadway Journal* in 1845, Whitman distinguished between art-singing and heart-singing, the former associated with European performers and the latter with those from the United States. European music, he wrote, was "made to please royal ears," and in that respect, it had adequately expressed the character of aristocratic society. Despite the popularity of "the tenors, boffos, and operatic troupes" who toured in the New World, Whitman had detected the emergence of an American strain of music, a music that appealed "to the throbbings of the great heart of humanity itself." In groups such as the Hutchinson and Cheney families, he heard the unadorned, original beauty of the human voice. Commenting on the Cheneys' performance at a New York saloon, he praised the "elegant simplicity" of the family's style: "Thus, said we in our heart, is the true method which must become popular in the United States—which must supplant the stale, second-hand, foreign method, with its flourishes, its ridiculous sentimentality, its anti-republican spirit, and its sycophantic influence, tainting the young taste of the republic." In the heart-singing of Americans, Whitman found a native-born simplicity that by expressing the soul of democracy, expressed the soul of humanity as well.

In making a distinction between art music and heart music, in emphasizing the importance of simplicity and the soul, Whitman was on the road towards making a broader statement about what constituted aesthetic value.

By the end of the 1840s, he had become an ardent fan of opera, a dignified, but still popular entertainment that was just beginning to take on its current aristocratic associations. The poet's love of the opera is legendary. In "Song of Myself," he describes hearing a soprano and convulsing as if he had climaxed, the music placing him amid "the steeps of honeyed morphine." His own aria-like laments in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" affirm that despite his early misgivings, he found tremendous aesthetic possibility in European singing. "A new world—a liquid world—rushes like a torrent through you," Whitman wrote after a performance of Verdi's *Ernani*. "If you have the true musical feeling in you, from this night you date a new era in your development, and, for the first time, receive your ideas of what the divine art of music really is."

While Whitman's appreciation for European composers evolved over time, he retained his belief that heart music would be the foundation of American song. When he heard America singing, he heard the voices of individuals rather than of traditions or schools. The songs Americans sang were intimately tied to their identity—not as artists but as laborers:

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
> Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
> The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
> The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
> The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
> The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
> The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
> The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
> Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
> The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
> Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

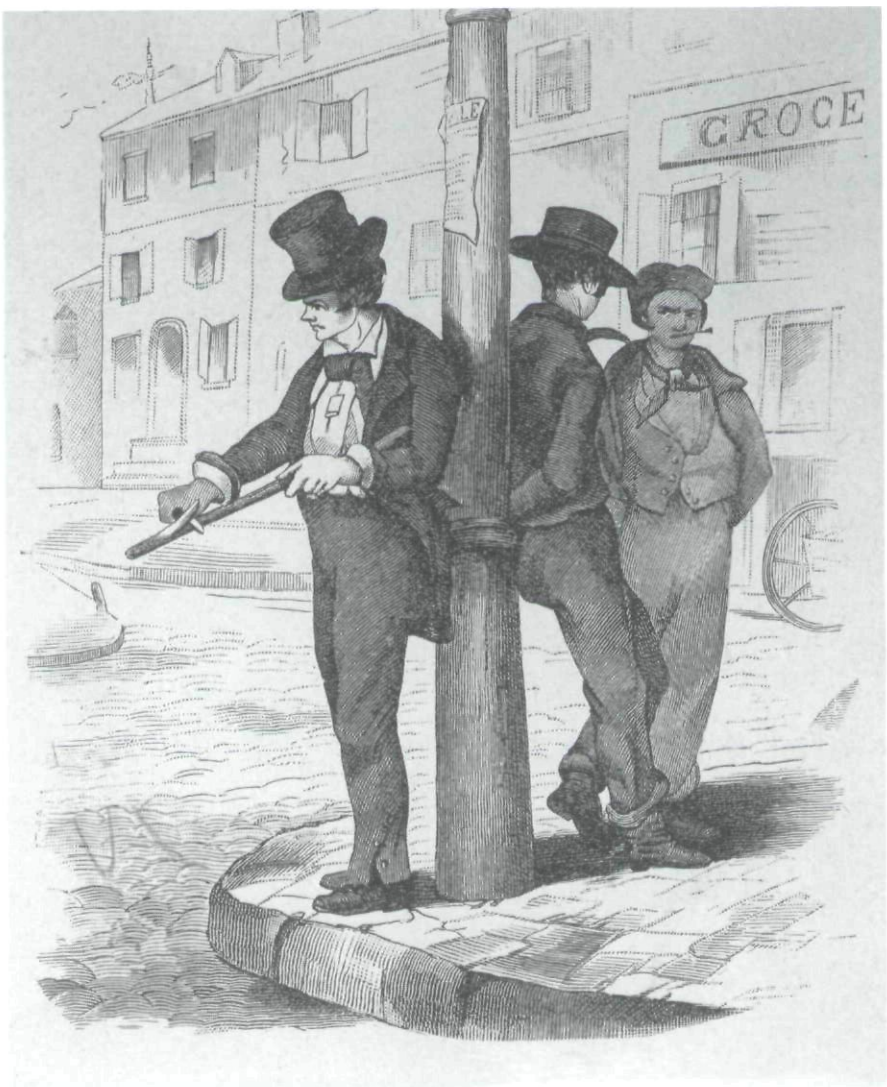
To Whitman, the voices of American singers conveyed history, experience, and work; their songs arose not from their aesthetic genius but from their individual character. We cannot expect these voices to have been conventionally beautiful or artistic. The voices Whitman heard were strained, cracked, heavily accented, and perhaps even out of tune. But it was out of this music, this democratic heart-singing, that "the party of young fellows" emerged, singing their songs into the night, their voices robust and strong.

Although he coined the phrase ten years before the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's interest in heart-singing would remain with him until the end of his life. He several times stated that the most fertile ground for cultivating a distinctly American music was the African-American experience. In *An American Primer*, he praised the regenerative power of black English, arguing that the speech of slaves had "hints of the future theory of the modification of all the words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America, leaving the words just as they are for writing and speaking, but the same words so modified as to answer perfectly for musical purposes, on grand and simple principles." When Horace Traubel asked him about American music in 1889, the poet pointed to the songs that came out of the South. America's "best work so far" seemed to be in the direction of slave songs. Songs such as "Old Folks at Home" and "Old Black Joe" were superb, Whitman said, "exquisite specimens, some of them, out of the heart of nature—hitting off" Southern life with "wonderful expression."

Whitman did not attribute these songs to Stephen Foster, the white composer who wrote and arranged them. As he described them, the songs came from a culture, not an individual. The racist quality of Foster's songs is glaringly apparent today, a fact punctuated by Whitman's repeated description of them as "nigger songs." And yet, like W. E. B. DuBois, the poet seemed to hear in such songs a promising engagement with African-American music, the "whole phrases of Negro melody," as DuBois put it in *The Souls of Black Folk*, giving structure to Foster's compositions. W. C. Handy would later come to a similar conclusion, commenting in his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, that songs such as "My Old Kentucky Home" owed their existence to the same "well of sorrow from which Negro music is drawn." It is hard to imagine a music more immersed in heart-singing than the songs that arose from the violence, prejudice, and poverty of the South. What Whitman heard in the background of Foster's melodies were the songs that Frederick Douglass credited with awakening his own understanding of slavery, the sorrow songs that would eventually lead to gospel, ragtime, jazz, and the blues. As Larry Griffin points out in his contribution to *Utopia in the Present Tense*, Whitman's "native grand opera" emerged out of the African-American experience and animated the nation at large. It would later surface in the many variants and descendants of rock 'n' roll.

Speaking to Traubel, Whitman predicted that American music would come from its most basic cultural roots, that the nation's singers would define a standard of beauty that reflected how the people actually lived, "the heart of nature" as it existed without pretense or ornament. "This is the mystery of democracy," Woodrow Wilson once said of Abraham Lincoln's Illinois home, "that its richest fruits sprung up out of soils which no man has prepared and in circumstances where they are least expected." From the beginning of his ca-

reer, Whitman emphasized the similarly humble origins of *Leaves of Grass*. He introduced himself in 1855 as "one of the roughs," suggesting that he was one of the Bowery B'hoys who roamed Manhattan's streets and populated its minstrel shows, theaters, and saloons. Fiercely proud of their working-class heritage, the Bowery B'hoys may well have been Whitman's model for the "party of young fellows" singing their songs. Despite his love for the Italian opera, Whitman anticipated a different form of music developing in the United States, one in which the songs of black and white Americans would intermix, their voices rising out of the nation's violent racial past. To borrow a phrase



Nineteenth-century engraving of three boys on a street corner, entitled *Specimen Bowery Boys*. (CORBIS)

from Greil Marcus, the native grand opera would descend from "the old weird America" as it surfaced in the plantations of Louisiana, the hills of Kentucky, and the streets of the nation's cities.

Marcus's phrase is important, for Whitman's emphasis on roots did not rest on the clean, folksy republicanism of the Hutchinson and Cheney families. Reading *Leaves of Grass* alongside rock brings the book's rebelliousness into sharper focus. Like the greatest of heart singers, Whitman knew the satisfactions of malice and revolt. He drew upon insurgent slaves and New York gangs in giving his work a swaggering insolence. In "I Sing the Body Electric," he declared himself Lucifer's "sorrowful terrible heir," a slave bent on destroying all that oppressed him. In "Respondez!" he replied to the inequities of his age with an unparalleled series of bitterly ironic propositions: "let the people sprawl with yearning, aimless hands! let their tongues be broken! let their eyes be discouraged! let none descend into their hearts with the fresh lusciousness of love!" Classical composers have long been attracted to *Leaves of Grass*, but a poem such as "Respondez!" has the kind of harsh, energetic lament that would make it ideal for a blues or even punk performance: "Let the slaves be masters! let the masters become slaves! / Let the reformers descend from the stands where they are forever bawling! let an idiot or insane person appear on each of the stands!" Embedded in the poet's own version of heart-singing is an understanding that American hearts contained a good deal of arrogance, confusion, and rage.

Whitman eventually excluded many of these passages from *Leaves of Grass*, suggesting that the anger they expressed was not compatible with his persona as the Good Gray Poet. Regardless of his later hesitations, the poet gave the spirit of insurrection an honored place in the cosmos, transforming it from a fleeting, hot-headed emotion to a universal force. In "Chanting the Square Deific," he adds the devil to the usual Christian trinity of deities, classing rebellion alongside power, unity, and love:

> Aloof, dissatisfied, plotting revolt,
> Comrade of criminals, brother of slaves,
> Crafty, despised, a drudge, ignorant,
> With sudra face and worn brow, black, but in the depths of my heart,
> proud as any,
> Lifted now and always against whoever scorning assumes to rule me,
> Morose, full of guile, full of reminiscences, brooding, with many wiles,
> (Though it was thought I was baffled and dispel'd, and my wiles done,
> but that will never be,)
> Defiant, I, Satan, still live, still utter words, in new lands duly appearing,
> (and old ones also,)

> Permanent here from my side, warlike, equal with any, real as any,
> Nor time nor change shall ever change me or my words.

In Whitman's hands, defiance becomes a necessary spiritual and psychological force. For the firemen, Bowery B'hoys, and other gangs of lower Manhattan, that sense of unruliness was also a broad cultural orientation, a means of navigating the new worlds of ethnic rivalry, urban poverty, and the ubiquitous graft that accompanied the institutionalization of New York City. To sympathize with the devil was to acknowledge the spirit of democratic insurrection that ran throughout the universe.

As Whitman knew, the problem with a society's being both radically populist and warlike was that if such attitudes went unchecked, they could translate into corruption, riots, and anarchy. The challenge was to capture that insolence in an art that encouraged a democratic distrust of authority but did not result in the violent tribalization of society. Whitman hoped that *Leaves of Grass* would produce these effects, but he was bound for disappointment. Looking back over his career in 1889, he complained, "the people, the crowd—I have had no way of reaching them. I needed to reach the people . . . but it's too late now." Although it owes little to him, rock has taken over the poet's dream of cultivating and celebrating the defiance of listeners around the world, and for the most part, it has contained that defiance within a coherent, albeit commercial, structure. The music is founded on heart singers and heart musicians combining to create an overwhelmingly visceral force. Among its many gifts, rock addresses the Bowery B'hoy in each of us, offering mosh pits and smashed guitars as satisfying expressions of mayhem and revolt.

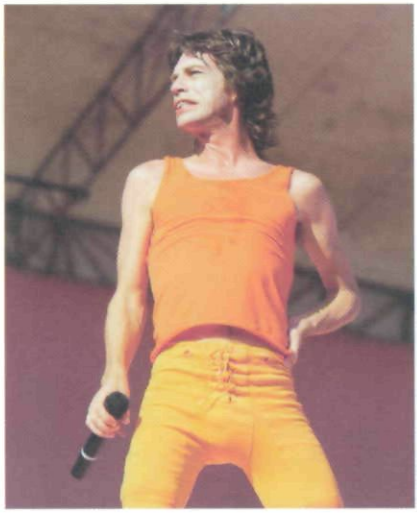
Once he divorced singing from traditional aesthetics, Whitman opened the way for understanding the voice as an expression of the body. As the phrase "heart-singing" indicates, the beauty of the democratic singer is inextricable from the flesh, the corporeal self that Whitman made the bedrock of individuality. When the poet's laborers sang, they were not reaching after some immaterial sublime; their voices came invigorated with character and sexual desire. For readers who grew up with the blues and rock 'n' roll, Whitman's innovations seem both instinctual and fitting. Whether raised on the recordings of James Brown, Bob Dylan, Tina Turner, or Sleater-Kinney, we have come to *Leaves of Grass* already convinced that the voice is more an instrument of expression than a polished, aesthetic achievement: "each singer sings what belongs to him or her and to none else." Janis Joplin's version of the blues rises from a host of musical influences, but what makes her such a haunting cultural presence is the way her voice seems perpetually birthed out of her body, the flesh made audible through her charismatic labor. In the voices of Whitman's America, we hear diaphragms heaving, throats clearing, and voices straining from too many cigarettes and too much singing.

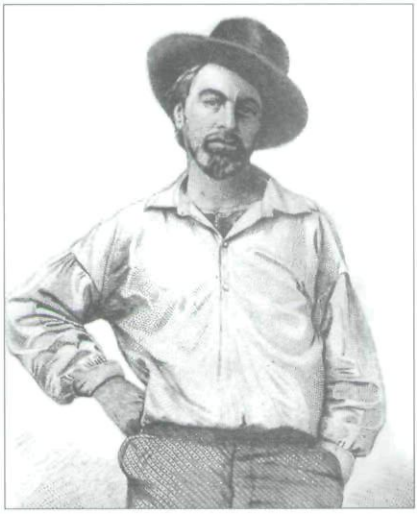
The body in *Leaves of Grass* is governed by a distinctly phallic sexuality. When Whitman sings of the phallus in "From Pent-Up Aching Rivers," he celebrates the "divine act" of fathering children. Throughout much of the "Children of Adam" cluster, sex takes on a cosmic, mythic significance: showers gush, rivers overrun their banks, and the poet feels within himself an irritable tide. Whitman overflows with fertility as if he were a human Nile. But the poet also glories in a more gritty, urban sexuality distinct from reproduction. The original opening of "Native Moments" celebrates the body's capacity for multiple and varied pleasures:

> Native moment—when you come upon me—ah you are here now,
> Give me now libidinous joys only,
> Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,
> To-day I go consort with Nature's darlings, to-night too,
> I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies
> of young men,
> I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,
> The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I take for my love some prostitute—
> I pick out some low person for my dearest friend . . .

Whether his lovers are men or women, Whitman focuses on the pleasures of male sexuality. As the poet of coarse delights and carousing, he claims the midnight orgies of young men as the basis for an erotic democracy.

From its early progenitors to its most famous performers, rock 'n' roll has grounded itself in the fervor and comedy of male sexual energy. Credited by many as having invented jazz, Jelly Roll Morton named himself after the sexual position New Orleans prostitutes used to bring a man to orgasm quickly. In an often covered song, Buddy Holly boasted that his "love was bigger than a Cadillac" and complained that when he tried to "show it," his girl drove him back. Little Richard became notorious in the beginning of his career for caressing the microphone that outrageously jutted between his legs. Rock has ritualized this immersion in male sexuality, turning each guitarist into a phallus-wielding pharaoh. As the legions of air guitarists would suggest, this energy is not confined to performers—nor is it confined to men. When he sang, "I'm a phallus in pigtails" on *Space Oddity*, David Bowie affirmed the symbol's importance even as he began to explore a transgendered persona on stage. Just as Egyptian goddesses were at times depicted with a phallus, musicians from Patti Smith to P. J. Harvey have inhabited the desiring, libidinous voice of both rock 'n' roll history and *Leaves of Grass*. It was with characteristic bluntness and humor that the Rolling Stones titled their 1971 album *Sticky Fingers*. Enlisting Andy Warhol in the effort, they featured a man's swollen, blue-jeaned crotch





LEFT: Mick Jagger, 1981 (CORBIS); RIGHT: Walt Whitman, 1855 (WHITMAN ARCHIVE)

on the cover. The band notoriously invited fans to participate in their sexual hijinks by supplying the crotch with a working zipper.

Through the ages, part of the appeal of *Leaves of Grass* has been the way Whitman blurs the line between observers and participants, making the act of reading poetry a journey towards a new kind of existence. In one of the most arresting passages in "Song of Myself," Whitman offers a parable of a woman whose own desires are awakened by her encounter with male eroticism:

> Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
> Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;
> Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.
>
> She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
> She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.
>
> Which of the young men does she like the best?
> Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Aroused by the men's open display, the woman mentally leaves her rich home and enters into the water, becoming what Whitman describes as the twenty-ninth bather. As the men cavort in the water, she imagines an unseen hand passing over their bodies, trembling as it descends from their temples to their ribs:

> The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun,
> they do not ask who seizes fast to them,

They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

Joining in their intense homoeroticism, the woman seizes fast to the men's bodies and is soaked with their orgasmic spray. Whether the men would desire the woman as much as she desires them does not seem significant to the poet. In Whitman's thinking, the phallic vision does not finish the twenty-ninth bather; it begins her.

Rock 'n' roll promises its listeners precisely this transformative effect. From television's censoring of Elvis's hips to Congressional investigations of scandalous lyrics, the music has consistently attracted controversy because authorities fear its success in transporting fans to new sexual, racial, and political worlds. In the twenty-ninth bather, we have an image of the many listeners who discovered in popular music a challenging, liberating force. Rock musicians have regularly celebrated this power of their art. Among hundreds of examples, there is Lou Reed's Jenny, who claims that even as a young girl, she had discovered that "there was nothing happening" in her suburban home. With their two TV sets and Cadillac cars, Jenny's parents had created the kind of stifling, domestic environment that Whitman hoped to overthrow. "They were going to be the death of us all," she says. But Jenny's angst is lifted, her boredom relieved, when a new kind of music comes over the radio. "She started dancin' to that fine, fine music," Reed explains. "You know, her life was saved by rock 'n' roll." As Robert Pattison suggests in the *Triumph of Vulgarity*, rock frequently presents its embrace of the vulgar in romantic, redemptive terms. The twenty-ninth bathers of today no longer peer at the world from behind the window blinds. They dance in their bedrooms to MP3s, the music ushering them into identities and experiences that were hitherto out of reach.

In *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus writes, "No rock 'n' roller can exist without a relationship with an audience, whether it is the imaginary audience one begins with, or the all-too-real confusion of the audience one wins." In Whitman's democratic aesthetics, both real and fictive readers were central to the poet's power. Not only did American artists hope to create their audiences, but they expected audiences to play a role in creating them as well. As Whitman put it in 1855, "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." Although he set an impossibly high standard for himself, the statement was consistent with his attraction to spectators and crowds.

Although its origins lie in ritual and performance, poetry had developed into a predominantly solitary form of art long before the antebellum era, an art appreciated in private or in small, domestic settings. *Leaves of Grass* rails

against that isolation, encouraging readers to connect their intimate experience with the fellowship of the public square and street. In "Song of the Open Road," Whitman commands us to come out of our homes and join the procession gathering behind him. In "Song of the Answerer," he greets readers as students, watching them approach in "numberless gangs." With the advent of commercial recording, music has come closest to fulfilling Whitman's dream of an art that can be distributed to individuals and yet encourage camaraderie among them. Rock has been particularly successful in this regard. The commercial magic of the most enduring bands lies in their ability to encourage listeners to see themselves not as consumers but as initiates, members of a vast community of like-minded fans. The poet strove for a similar effect. In 1855 he addressed his readers as "eleves" or pupils, and by the end of his career, he had attracted a circle of admirers in England and the United States who thought of themselves as disciples. The devotion of these men and women earned them a variety of epithets, including the "hot little prophets," a term of derision that awaits recovery as a great name for a band.

The concert provides rock with the ritual of community that poetry lost hundreds of years ago. It is the "native grand opera" that Whitman envisioned arising out of African-American speech, a spectacle of heart-singing in which both the audience and musicians participate. Assembled in stadiums, arenas, auditoriums, and clubs, fans create a culture among themselves, calling out song titles and dancing in the aisles. They become their own performers—strumming invisible guitars, banging invisible drums, singing along with the vocalists on stage. Despite the prevalence of prerecorded music and orchestrated special effects, the concert continues to celebrate authenticity. Rock bands do not convince by their arguments or rhymes; like Whitman, they convince by their presence, exuding an electronic charisma that feeds on the audience's intensity. There is a moment near the end of many shows when the giant lights that have showcased the band are turned towards the crowd, illuminating their sweaty faces and gyrating limbs. As if on cue, the audience always roars in approval, for in that gesture, they perceive the band's democratic affection for them.

Such stagecraft can, of course, be both manipulative and authoritarian. The deep connection some performers feel with their fans can easily be counterfeited by others. And the drugged-out kids slumped in the corner are hardly models for the regenerated selves that *Leaves of Grass* champions. Because rock has been more commercially successful than poetry, it has also had to confront the mean realities of commercial production. Corporations sponsor nationwide tours; arenas are filled with vendors selling T-shirts, water bottles, glow sticks, and photo albums emblazoned with the names of performers; and the search for new talent is more likely to focus on copying an already profit-

able act than on developing a musician's songwriting skills. To be a rock star today is to be part of an international industry focused on marketability and demographics.

And yet, despite this limited vision of success, rock continues to magnetize listeners with its restless energy and drive. On a recent trip to the Bowery Ballroom, I saw a warm-up band work its way through the evening's opening set. There were about sixteen people in the audience, most of whom were chatting and milling about as the band launched into their songs of psychedelic angst. The band consisted of only a guitarist and a drummer: the former would later back up the headliner; the latter doubled as a roadie. This was a party of young fellows stripped to its hard-edged core, two musicians making a gloriously heart-felt noise. No one in the audience had heard the band before, but as the cymbals crashed and the guitar pounded out line after melodic line, the crowd edged closer to the stage. By the fourth song, a dozen people at the bar had left their seats. I thought of Whitman and his Bowery B'hoys roaming the streets of lower Manhattan, singing with muscle and strength. In the lights that shone from behind the band, the audience's shadows grew longer, stretching back into the unfilled space; they seemed to touch as everyone moved to the beat.

As we mark the sesquicentennial of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, poetry may be gravitating towards the energy and ritualism of rock. Rock music has changed what many readers and writers expect from the literary world, and Whitman would have been pleased at the initial results. Late in life, he mourned his inability to travel to different cities and promote his book, wanting to "whack about" and "bargain" himself in New York, Chicago, and St. Louis. The profusion of readings today follows Whitman's notion that the performance of a charismatic personality is vital to the success of American poetry. Some of the poets most identified with *Leaves of Grass*—Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, and Sherman Alexie—have not only been interested in live performance; they have also lent their talents to rock 'n' roll. The rise of the poetry slam may signal the emergence of a refreshingly hybrid literary form. With its emphasis on affect, competition, and the crowd's response, the slam has invigorated the culture of poetry with the Dionysian energy of a rock show. In coming years, it will be interesting to see whether the traditional university reading begins to incorporate the openness and immediacy that audiences value in slam competitions throughout the United States.

"What always indicates the poet," Whitman wrote, "is the crowd of the pleasant company of singers, and their words." Listeners have found in rock the sense of inspired self-empowerment that Whitman hoped Americans would get from his poems. Far outside fantasies of fame and wealth, people identify with the music. They buy instruments and teach themselves how to

play. They form garage bands; they play middle school dances; they drum on plastic tubs outside the subway. Across the globe, the music has created a multitude of singers and musicians who have defined its traditions anew. Rock's capacity to engage the listener as a participant eradicates the old creative boundaries between artists and the people who stood humbled by their work. The turntable was once an appliance for delivering someone else's songs. Thanks to some innovative teenagers in the Bronx, it is now widely recognized as an instrument.

In the same spirit, we can read *Leaves of Grass* for the poet's sweeping and sonorous voice, marveling at the poems as they descend to us from years ago; or, we can accept the challenge of joining the pleasant company of singers who find their music in his words. These options reveal Whitman's promise rather than a delimiting choice. "I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence," he proclaims in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," confident that we will turn to him as a source of comfort, nourishment, and health. "What thoughts you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance." Perhaps anticipating anniversaries such as this one, he knew that in reimagining his work, we would reimagine ourselves.