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# Revolutionary Alchemy: Incantation and Collage as Magical Methods in Rock of the Countercultural Era

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## Abstract

Magic held a special fascination for the post-war counterculture, a movement that valued music and art as tools of the imagination to counter what Theodore Roszak called the “technocracy” in which science was to blame for cultural disenchantment in the West. At a time when countercultural rhetoric was bolstering a newfound faith in the power of music to generate social change, rock music began to be conceived by many musicians and perceived by audiences as a kind of magic. This article considers music by the Beatles, the Doors, Pink Floyd, Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, and others to show how musicians invoked magical imagery and how some drew on magic-inspired techniques of art such as incantation and collage. This study finds that invocations of magic in rock during the countercultural era balanced precariously between the charismatic religious shaman whose magic corresponds to the faith of the cultural group and tricks of the secular illusionist who practices a magic of deception.

Keywords: Magic, Counterculture, Musique Concrete, the Beatles, Jim Morrison, Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart

On October 21, 1967, as part of the March on the Pentagon organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, the underground rock group the Fugs conducted a magic ritual as a contribution to the anti-war movement. Along with leading countercultural figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Jerry Rubin, and Abbie Hoffman, the lead singer of the Fugs, Ed Sanders, led a chant that was intended to levitate the Pentagon with the hopes of driving out the evil spirits that had been steering the war effort, namely the military high command. Beginning with an invocation in which they called upon numerous gods of the ancient world and the power of the cosmos to protect their ceremonies, the Fugs began to chant “out, demons, out” while some chanted the sacred syllable “om” that had become popular at the time.

In his narrative account of this event, Norman Mailer describes how he joined in with the collective chant of exorcism and suggests that this was the moment when the counterculture crossed over from simple spirituality into the uncertain realm of magic:

now suddenly an entire generation of acid-heads seemed to have said goodbye to easy visions of heaven, no, now the witches were here, and rites of exorcism, and black

terrors of the night—hippies being murdered. Yes, the hippies had gone from Tibet to Christ to the Middle Ages, now they were Revolutionary Alchemists.<sup>1</sup>

Mailer saw that the “easy visions” of spirituality of the 1960s—quests for transcendence through meditation, yoga, and Eastern gurus—could easily be eclipsed by the more seductive appeal of occult magic that offered the hope of possibly changing the world. Although Mailer lent his enthusiastic support to this invocation of magic as social protest, neither Mailer, nor his companion Robert Lowell, who complained that the incantation was too repetitious, nor anyone else present that day likely believed in the efficacy of such a ritual. Surely not even the Fugs themselves with their tongues in their collective cheeks believed that the Pentagon could be levitated by sheer will of the community, much less be able to expel the military leadership inside. The attempted levitation of the Pentagon provides an example of how magic, an essentially private practice of spells conducted for personal gain, is exposed as absurdity when brought out into the public. Motivated by a desire for change in the physical world using only will power, magic as a private practice may be an act of individual desperation, but as a collective practice in public it becomes an absurd act by which one can see the sheer desperation of its practitioners, in this case the anti-war movement of the late sixties.

By 1968 the counterculture had reached just such a point of desperation, a point at which even magic, a fundamentally irrational practice, gave some hope for political change and the deep cultural transformation sought by the youth movement. As an act contrary to science, magic was hailed as a transcendental and oppositional force in Theodore Roszak’s *The Making of a Counterculture*, in which he argued that industrial society—the technocracy—had reached a peak of rationality, organizational integration, and affluence. Having achieved “99 per cent completion,” the technocracy was characterized by the idea that “the vital needs of man . . . are purely technical in character” with all human needs now managed by the official experts of technocratic society on government or corporate payrolls.<sup>2</sup> Rejection of the technocracy would mean no longer passively accepting the rational processing of information by experts and instead actively seeking a more direct experience of life. If science and reason had become enemies of human freedom, then liberation was to be found instead in a magical conception of life and art that went beyond the realm of the explicable. Roszak argued that “wherever the visionary imagination grows bright, magic, that old antagonist of science, renews itself.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (New York: The New American Library, 1968), 140–41.

2. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 10–11.

3. Roszak, 240.

The insidiousness of the technocracy, according to Roszak, was evident in the way in which society had so easily neutralized the vitality, mystery, and magic of art. A society based on reason can only accept the visions of William Blake as aesthetic metaphors rather than actual visions or hallucinations, and so Blake's work is treated as literature rather than the work of a mystic seer. Blake became a touchstone for leading beat writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs, who based their work in ecstatic experience with each author cultivating a Blake-like mystical persona in different ways. Roszak portrays the ideal visionary artist as a kind of shaman who remains out of touch with the everyday world in order to access the spiritual realm and heal the community through summoning the spirit world.

The desperation for immediate revolution also prevails in Jeff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture*, which is pitched more manically than Roszak's book yet shares a similar urgency for radical change that should be as psychic as it is social.<sup>4</sup> Nuttall called for visionary magic as a political weapon, invoking a revolutionary mysticism, calling on artists to "release forces into the prevailing culture that would dislocate society."<sup>5</sup> Like Roszak, Nuttall celebrates artists who, shaman-like, distance themselves from daily life to become a kind of oracle that can cure the ills of society. Nuttall's history of artistic development traces an ever increasing, Rimbaud-like delirium of the senses that celebrates the absurdity of Dadaism, the dream states of Surrealism, and culminates in the writing of William S. Burroughs, with Nuttall suggesting that Burroughs drew upon supernatural forces in his nightmare scenarios derived from random cutups of information. For Nuttall, artists whose work appeared as magic were uniquely positioned in the countercultural battle and able to create "an ego-dissolving delirium wherein a tribal telepathic understanding could grow up among men."<sup>6</sup> The cruelty and violence of mainstream culture should be countered by an equivalent magic that aggressively and ecstatically attacks rational society with outrageous absurdity.

The counterculture's artistic forebears were the Dadaists of the early twentieth century, driven by the desperate circumstances of an even more brutal war to create anti-rational art that had an aura of magic. As a rejection of the society that had created World War I, Dadaists Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and others gathered at Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire to explore absurdity, irrationality, and chaos through theater and staged poetry. Hugo Ball, self-described as "the magic bishop," described what he and his fellow Dadaists were doing as "a process of conjuring, and its effect is magic."<sup>7</sup> Absurdist conjuring included performances of simultaneous poetry with disruptive musical accompaniment, Tristan

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4. Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968).

5. Nuttall, 264.

6. Nuttall, 264.

7. Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 104.

Tzara's cut-up poetry with words drawn randomly from a hat to defy any rational sense of order, and Hugo Ball's sound poetry such as his "Karawane" performed in a metallic-looking costume at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916.

For Ball, his sound poems were ecstatic incantations to summon the spirit world and included words that the artist drew from ancient magic.<sup>8</sup> Dadaism also worked its oppositional magic in the visual arts through the collage works of John Heartfield, George Grosz, and Hannah Hoch. As pioneers in the new art of photomontage, these artists constructed visually disorienting collages of the everyday world, juxtaposing images to transform physical reality, as if by magic, to expose the problems of Weimar Germany and the rise of Hitler. Dadaist magic was revived again in France in the late 1950s by Guy Debord and the Situationist International with absurdist forms of Dada protest in a movement that participated in the Paris riots of 1968. As rock music began to be seen as an especially loud megaphone for the counterculture, the stage was set for revolutionary alchemy to spread throughout Anglo-American popular culture.

In the US and the UK, countercultural ideas of psychic protest filtered through popular music in imagery and sound as rock stars began to assume roles as oracles able to summon magic spirits. Among fans of 1960s rock, the term shaman is often attributed to Jim Morrison, lead singer for the Doors. Drawing heavily on his interest in Native American culture, Morrison, like Hugo Ball, portrayed himself as a charismatic shaman. While Morrison's poetry tended more toward surrealist dream imagery than Dadaist absurdity, the shamanic aspect of his persona emerged most clearly during his onstage performances with the Doors. Conceiving of the rock concert as community ritual, Morrison would begin performances of "The Celebration of the Lizard," with an invocation, "Is everybody in? Let the ceremony begin." While the other members of the Doors worked diligently to hold together some of the band's more chaotic concert performances, Morrison seemed less interested in musical cohesiveness than in what he called "an hour for magic" in which something eventful would happen, such as his onstage arrest for obscenity in New Haven, Connecticut in 1967. Morrison's most legendary performance was a concert in Miami, Florida on March 1, 1969, in which he encouraged the audience to start a riot and take off their clothes. After Morrison teased the audience that he was going to expose his genitals, he was arrested and charged with obscenity a few days later. Although convicted of indecent exposure, many accounts told by those at the event, including band members, confirm that

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8. Erdmute Wenzel White, *The Magic Bishop: Hugo Ball, Dada Poet* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 103.

Morrison never actually exposed himself. Described as a “mass hallucination” by keyboardist Ray Manzarek, this was precisely where the real magic act occurred.<sup>9</sup>

Morrison’s rock shamanism brings together two seemingly conflicting aspects of the charismatic magician. The shamanic spiritualist in whom the community has invested their faith may in fact be a charlatan who fools the audience into seeing or hearing something that never actually happened. While Morrison appears to have been what Roszak would describe as a “good priest” in that he “made the sacramental presence available to everyone,”<sup>10</sup> he was also a showman who used illusionist magic to create an avant-garde transgression that was never fully consummated. In his idealization of the shaman, Roszak differentiates between ancient magic as community healing and deceptive trickery by entertainer illusionists and séance spiritualists that practice what he considers to be a debased form of authentic magic.<sup>11</sup> Such romanticizing of the shaman overlooks the fact that deception has long played a role in shamanic practices since ancient time.<sup>12</sup> The difference between spiritual belief and deceitful illusion is not so black and white. The faith of the magician “is sincere in so far as it corresponds to the faith of the whole group” yet magic “remains mysterious even for the magician.”<sup>13</sup> Morrison the shaman knew exactly what the audience came for in their hour for magic, yet amid the chaos he seemed equally mystified and hardly in control of the results. His long trial for indecent exposure in Florida became his undoing in the months before his death in 1971. Morrison’s stage magic allowed him to achieve legendary status after his death and his shamanic image has been promoted by numerous biographers, filmmakers such as Oliver Stone, and his bandmate Ray Manzarek in his many public interviews.

In much of late sixties rock, however, magic was more of a carefully crafted stylistic device than the spontaneous performance art of Jim Morrison. A common invocation of magic as a surface aesthetic among rock bands from the UK was dressing up in colorful magician-like costumes and this look quickly became a fashionable part of the psychedelic wardrobe of 1967. Album covers and publicity photos of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Donovan, Procol Harum, Tyrannosaurus Rex, and others presented pop stars as colorful sorcerers. The magician image reflected their newfound power to conjure up hit records while musicians began to reference occult figures such as Aleister Crowley, whose

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9. Ray Manzarek, “Morrison in Miami: The Doors’ Manzarek Tells the Story,” radio broadcast, National Public Radio (December 10, 2010) <https://www.npr.org/2010/12/10/131960761/what-really-happened-at-the-doors-1969-concert>.

10. Roszak, 262.

11. Roszak, 240–41.

12. Randall Styers, *Making Magic* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 180–83.

13. Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 97.

face appears on the *Sergeant Pepper* album cover. Song lyrics were rife with magical references to wizards, witches, magic spells, and esoteric sources of divination such as the *I Ching* and the *Tao Te Ching*. Marc Bolan presented himself as a kind of guru-magician on a mission to enchant audiences with musical wizardry, proudly displaying books and esoteric tools of sorcery in publicity photos of Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Darker portrayals of magic were constructed by the Rolling Stones who, in countering the tamer magical imagery of the Beatles, presented themselves as sinister sorcerers on the cover of the album *Their Satanic Majesties Request* as they began to flirt with occultism and associate with occult filmmaker Kenneth Anger. An aborted concert film project in 1968, *The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus*, depicted the band as circus performers in what has been interpreted as a rebellious attempt to identify with the British working class.<sup>14</sup> Such a gesture, however, appears in hindsight to be an illusionist trick carried out by the Stones led by ringmaster Mick Jagger, who eventually reveals his identity as the trickster Lucifer with an image of the devil scrawled across his bare chest near the end of the performance of “Sympathy for the Devil.” Rock magic became darker by the end of the sixties as rock groups continued to explore the occult, such as Led Zeppelin with their mystical song lyrics inspired by Tolkien’s fashionable novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, and guitarist Jimmy Page’s obsession with the black magick of Aleister Crowley. Page indulged in his own personal practice of magick by having the words of Crowley etched onto the vinyl of the album *Led Zeppelin III*.<sup>15</sup>

During the peak of the trend for such imagery in 1967, however, magic was much less sinister, with the Beatles dressing as magicians in the film *Magical Mystery Tour*. Portraying themselves lightheartedly as silly wizards bumping incompetently around a laboratory while overseeing a bus tour by the cast members which included the Beatles playing themselves, the most successful parts of this critically disappointing film were the musical interludes performed by the Beatles. George Harrison’s “Blue Jay Way” presented audiences with the first image of the mystical George, seated cross-legged and playing an imaginary harmonium as his performance ambiguously fogs in and out, then is intercut with nonsense imagery. Aside from the usual clowning around in garden settings so typical of promotional films of psychedelic rock of the time, this scene is intercut with shots of film projections onto faces and bodies, a magical cinematic technique favored by Surrealist-inspired artists such as William S. Burroughs.

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14. Barry J. Faulk, “New Left in Victorian Drag: The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 53, no. 2 (2011): 138–58.

15. Peter Bebergal, *Season of the Witch: How the Occult Saved Rock and Roll* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher-Penguin, 2014), 88.

The most magical part of the film may be John Lennon's "I Am the Walrus," not just for the imagery of the Beatles clowning around in masks with swaying police officers and mysterious characters bundled up in white sheets, but for the musical message of the song itself. "I Am the Walrus" reveals Lennon to be a more sinister and devious illusionist than the bumbling wizard he portrays in the film. Partly inspired by a letter he received describing how a teacher at one of his former schools in Liverpool was interpreting songs of the Beatles as significant social statements, Lennon decided to write nonsense lyrics to confuse would-be interpreters. Like Bob Dylan, who began writing more esoteric and surrealist lyrics in 1965 partly in response to the seriousness that had begun to pervade song lyrics, Lennon wrote for intentional inscrutability in this song, even drawing on his own grade school experiences of singing crude schoolboy songs in lines such as "yellow matter custard." Ironically, Lennon crafted such thickly textured nonsense that the song became one of his most scathing social critiques, attacking numerous targets, including the British police force drug squad and the counterculture's own elder statesman and cheerleader, Allen Ginsberg.

The Dadaist lyrics of "I Am the Walrus" may have created a diversion, but nevertheless hit the mark. In the chorus Lennon confusingly proclaims himself and his mates as "the eggmen," then emphatically identifies himself as "the walrus" followed by the phrase "goo goo g'joob." Like the illusionist who uses nonsense phrases such as "abracadabra" as a diversionary tactic to distract from any scrutiny of a magic trick, Lennon uses such a mysterious phrase for a similar purpose of throwing his interpreters off the scent. Aware of his countercultural role as a shamanic prophet by the late sixties, Lennon continued to play tricks with his audiences who had begun to search any newly released Beatles material for any significant signs, whether referring to countercultural protest as in the ambiguous "count me out/in" in the song "Revolution 1," death clues about Paul McCartney, or any sort of hidden mystical messages.<sup>16</sup> *The Beatles*, commonly known as the White Album, became a treasure trove for clue-hunters, including Charles Manson, even as Lennon satirized fan obsession by baiting listeners with clues on the song "Glass Onion." (2005): 241-67.

As the most musically and socially significant artists of their era, the Beatles easily assumed the role of countercultural shamans whose visions offered a glimpse of cosmic mysteries for fans devoted enough to unlock secret codes in the hope of finding out some higher wisdom or, at least, a definitive meaning to their songs. Considering that the Beatles operated as magician-entertainers within the technocratic business of popular music, it can

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16. The phrase "count me out/in" is sung but not printed. This single phrase has been hotly debated as everyone tried to discern which side Lennon was on, and it has become an important part of Beatles lore. For more, see John Platoff, "John Lennon, 'Revolution,' and the Politics of Musical Reception," *The Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 2 (2005): 241-67.



be productive to pose the question one typically asks of illusionist magicians: how do they do that trick that fools the audience? Being hoodwinked by a rock-star illusionist may not necessarily be a bad thing, especially if that illusionist is functioning as a charismatic shaman who, along with the audience, shares the hope for social change yet believes there are no easy answers to real-world problems that any artist could possibly provide. As in stage magic, such illusionist tricks can provide audiences with a kind of satisfaction in not being able to rationally explain what is going on.<sup>17</sup> Knowing that an explanation for the work exists yet is always hidden from view may point to a fundamental message behind the deceit. The countercultural musical shaman may be cautioning audiences—like Bob Dylan’s warning not to follow leaders—not to be misled by anyone, not even the artist-shaman who appears to work miracles.

### Magical Incantation in Rock

Acts of magic often feature an incantation that—diversionary tactic or not—ostensibly invokes supernatural forces and, as an anti-rational act, strikes a precarious balance between seriousness and absurdity. Proposing to levitate the Pentagon during a wartime crisis invites the seriousness of an incantation in which gods are invoked, yet such irrational action in the face of grim reality strikes one as laughable and pathetic. The Fugs may have been aware of the pathos of magical hope just as much as the Dadaists had been during World War I, but nevertheless believed in the artistic efficacy of the magic spell as a social statement. Magical incantation is powerful for its double meaning, offering hope that mystical forces may intervene for the sake of humanity, while at the same time making one painfully aware of its absurdity as an ineffective gesture against physical or social reality. Musical incantation can be aesthetically effective if it captures both seriousness and absurdity, such as John Lennon’s incantatory vocal rhythm on the verses of “I am the Walrus,” culminating in a chorus ending in “goo goo g’joob.” Such absurdity is delivered with serious intent and a sly wink, creating a powerful effect that resembles both mystical and illusionist forms of magic.

Magical incantations are not prayers—what Mailer referred to as the easy visions of heaven. Religious chants such as the sacred Hindu-Buddhist syllable “Om” and the Hare Krishna chant began appearing in popular music in the late 1960s, but these are testaments to the rise of Eastern spirituality in the West as opposed to magic. The vagueness of modern spirituality is in sharp contrast to the material specificity of magic. The Moody Blues chanting “Om” or George Harrison incorporating “Hare Krishna” into “My Sweet Lord” function more as musical prayers—a supplication of spiritual forces—than as magical

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17. Nanette De Jong and Barbara Lebrun, “Introduction: The Notion of Magic in Popular Music Discourse,” *Popular Music* 38, no. 1 (2019): 3

incantation that seeks to manipulate spiritual powers. Nevertheless, such spiritual chants can border on magical incantation when chanted with a certain intensity to enhance musical affect. John Coltrane's "Om," from the 1965 album *Om*, opens with a passage recited from the *Bhagavad Gita* followed by the "Om" chant that rises to a frenzy as the group launches into a high-energy, free-jazz freak-out. In a similar approach, Marc Bolan of Tyrannosaurus Rex uses the Hare Krishna chant as a climactic buildup near the conclusion of their first album from 1968, *My People Were Fair and Had Sky in Their Hair . . . But Now They're Content to Wear Stars on Their Brows*. Whereas the prayers of the Moody Blues and George Harrison bow in wonder and praise to the divine, Coltrane and Bolan chant to stir up spiritual forces in the recording studio to push the music to a Sufi-like state of ecstasy.

Writing and singing original lyrics in the style of an incantation can provide rhythmic momentum to a song and help create the aura of a magic spell. Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine" was written by Syd Barrett as a chant that strings together the names of several planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune—and their moons—Oberon, Miranda, and Titania—sung as a drone melody that sounds as if Barrett is trying to gather collective cosmic energy. In a filmed performance of the song for the BBC, Barrett dramatically waves his arms above his head like a conjurer while singing the vocable refrain that matches the descending line played by the band. The mysterious aspect of Barrett's charismatic persona was soon reinforced by the sudden unraveling of his mental state that led to his ouster from Pink Floyd, his withdrawal from the music business, and his enduring cult status.

The Doors make use of an incantation by Jim Morrison who chants an anagram of his own name, Mr. Mojo Risin, at the mid-point of the song "LA Woman" just as the song reaches its slowest tempo. Morrison's incantation, which initially makes no sense until listeners decipher the code, reinvigorates the song as he repeats the chant and the tempo gradually accelerates to the fast tempo at which the track began. An even more extended incantation can be heard in Marc Bolan's more explicit expression of magic on the song "The Wizard" on the 1971 album *T. Rex*, a freak out lasting almost nine minutes. Bolan builds up the intensity of the track, singing ecstatically on the word "wizard," and eventually arriving at a circular-sounding chanted phrase as a long coda, "he was a wizard and he was my friend he was."

Although it is questionable whether an incantation can summon the energy of spirit beings, an incantation can function as a way to summon the energy of musicians in the recording studio. The German rock group Can, who recorded most of their music as group improvisations performed live in the studio, have referred to their 1971 album *Tago Mago* as

their “magic record,” featuring a cover image resembling a head uttering a magic spell.<sup>18</sup> A dark and uneasy vision of Asian chant was invoked on the track “Aumgn,” in which Can keyboardist Irmin Schmidt chants Aleister Crowley’s version of the cosmic syllable in a freak-out that occupies the entire third side of the LP. Can guitarist, Michael Karoli, described how he had taught Schmidt about this chant, but when Schmidt suddenly entered the studio and began smashing chairs and chanting this black magic spell into the microphone, Karoli became furious that Schmidt would dare to invoke such serious black magic in a recording session.<sup>19</sup> Despite the disagreement over the appropriateness of using black magic, the session resulted in a track that generated an intense power in the studio, becoming a climactic moment on Can’s highly regarded two-disc album.

Dadaist absurdity was a key element in the music of Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band, a group that, true to their name, had moments on record that suggested something magical was behind the work of composer and bandleader, Don Van Vliet. On the band’s most celebrated album, *Trout Mask Replica*, Van Vliet paradoxically blends spontaneity in the recording studio with a meticulous, sorcerer-like command of his music as played by musicians who were mercilessly drilled during a nine-month gestation period of rehearsals before quickly recording the album. Among the many legends that add to the mystique of the album is the story of Van Vliet recording all his vocal overdubs quickly in the studio without the use of any headphones to guide him. Van Vliet’s vocal style is incantatory and absurd, as heard on the track “Neon Meate Dream of a Octafish,” in which he spits out and stammers his words as if he is desperately trying to create the right verbal sequence to make something happen. Perhaps the most miraculous thing about the album is not only that it was successfully recorded and released, but that the 28-song, 2-disc set continues to be hailed as a masterpiece—ranked as number 60 on *Rolling Stone’s* 2012 edition of *The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time*—even though many rock fans deem the record unlistenable.

### Sound Collage as Magical Deception

The more extreme approaches of Captain Beefheart, Can, and other musicians drawing on the avant-garde often involve the technique of collage which, although not commonly associated with magic, can function as an aesthetic equivalent of sympathetic magic. Based on the belief that similar objects may be connected through a kind of resonance, the practice of sympathetic magic is an attempt to manipulate a person or an object from a distance by manipulating a corresponding object close at hand, such as casting a spell on a

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18. Jim DeRogatis, *Kaleidoscope Eyes: Psychedelic Music from the 1960s to the 1990s* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), 132.

19. Alan Warner, *Tago Mago: Permission to Dream* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 118–19.

person using a doll that represents the person targeted. Unlike religion in which spiritual appeals are made to gods with the power to alter reality, sympathetic magic is a materialistic and purely technical process akin to alchemy, in which the skilled magician attempts to transform material into something miraculous. In magical conceptions of art, collage becomes a kind of sympathetic magic in which representations of things may be removed from their normal context and placed next to other representations of things in unexpected ways, with the hope for a corresponding change in the material world. Leigh Wilson argues that Dadaist photomontage, particularly the work of Raoul Hausmann, was similar to the work of spiritualist photographers in how these artists attempted to animate matter, rather than simply copy matter.<sup>20</sup> Photomontage, like cinema which has often been likened to magic,<sup>21</sup> can give the sense of a static picture that moves, but is just as much of a deceptive illusion as spiritualist photographs in which ghostly faces emerge.

With the development of electroacoustic music after World War II, the aural equivalent of photomontage was developed by musique concrète composers Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, whose 1955–56 composition *Gesang der Junglinge* created a hellish vision using the voice of a boy soprano singing a biblical text. During the mid-1960s, composer Steve Reich created two works for tape, *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, that alter how we normally perceive the sound of the human voice, with both pieces having a subtext of civil rights protest.<sup>22</sup> Although Reich was ostensibly engaging in formalist experiments that explored phase processes in sound, the use of African American voices in *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* give both works a sense of rebellious prophesy. Countless repetitions of a single phrase on the piece *Come Out* generate an incantation suggesting the inevitability of a revolutionary outcome that inspired Don Van Vliet to repeat the line “come out to show them” on the song “Moonlight on Vermont” from the album *Trout Mask Replica*. Reich’s *Come Out* is a magic act that aurally deceives the listener. The layering of a single voice emitted from two tape machines falling out of phase creates the illusion of ghost-like syllables appearing that are not actually there, like an aural version of a spiritualist photograph. Reich transforms the material voice without “touching” it—by doing little more than setting two tape machines in motion allowing listeners to experience a gradual aural transformation that Reich himself described as a feeling of paranoia.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Leigh Wilson, “Miraculous Constellations in Real Material: Spiritualist Phenomena, Dada Photomontage and Magic,” in *The Machine and The Ghost*, ed. Sas Mays and Neil Matheson (New York: Manchester University, 2013), 59.

21. Dan North, “Magic and Illusion in Early Cinema,” *Studies in French Cinema* 1, no. 2 (2001): 70–79.

22. Sumanth Gopinath, “The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich’s *Come Out*,” in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121–44.

23. Gopinath, 137–38.

Without appealing to any mystical spirits, *Come Out* nevertheless seems to reveal ghosts in the machines.

Frank Zappa was one of rock music's first and most preeminent collage artists whose work involved magical transformation of sounds. Although the cynical composer and bandleader would have bristled at the suggestion that his work had anything to do with the supernatural, his mastery over his musicians, his skillful use of the recording studio, and overall conceptions of his many projects make Zappa nothing short of a master secular illusionist and an especially deceptive artist. The first rock album to feature absurdist sound collages in Dadaist style was the 1966 debut album by the Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!*, an album statement that may be one of the greatest deceptions of the rock counterculture. The entire double-album package leads listeners to believe that Zappa is a cheerleader for the counterculture, described in terms of the freak scene in Los Angeles at the time, and urging his listeners to "join the freak-out." The album jacket reads like an early Dadaist manifesto in the way it exclaims rebellion in explosions of statements and boldface quotations that propose freaking out as the best response to an unjust and oppressive society. Zappa also lists many of his artistic influences, including Surrealist painters Salvador Dali and Yves Tanguy, and pioneers of electroacoustic music Luigi Nono and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The entire album is an absurd collage of contrasting songs, ranging from satires of banal pop songs to avant-garde experimentation.

The idea of freaking out as a utopian, communal activity against a "plastic" society is reinforced by the album's final extended track, "The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet," in which Zappa invited locals from the Hollywood freak scene to freak out on "\$500 worth of rented percussion."<sup>24</sup> One might be led to believe that this was an hour for magic in which the freaks spontaneously performed a Dadaist ritual of liberation from America's technocratic society on a Friday night in 1966. On the contrary, Zappa uses his documentation of this seemingly free-form event to create a highly ordered track that satirizes the counterculture, described on the album jacket as an "Unfinished Ballet in Two Tableaux." The first part, "Ritual Dance of the Child-Killer," does indeed capture the sense of spontaneous Dadaism with its simultaneous din of frenzied drumming and wild, animal-like voices. But as the track progresses into its second section, titled "Nullis Pretti (No Commercial Potential)," Zappa sculpts this event into a carefully ordered sound collage using vari-speed recording and tape splicing that transforms his freaks into comic book characters. Zappa's reference to Stravinsky's ballet, *Le sacre du printemps*, suggests that a

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24. Frank Zappa, *Freak Out! The Mothers of Invention* (Verve 710-003, 1966) [liner notes], n.p.

sacrifice happens in this work. The child symbolically killed here may be the young hippie-freak that represents the counterculture.<sup>25</sup>

The straight-edged Zappa's scorn for the pro-drug counterculture only grew stronger on subsequent albums such as *We're Only in It for the Money*, a 1968 concept album by the Mothers that attacks the youth movement and mainstream culture with equal vitriol. That same year Zappa released his first solo album, *Lumpy Gravy*, an electroacoustic collage that spans two sides of an LP combining Zappa's orchestral compositions recorded for the original 1967 album release with spoken word passages recorded and mixed in later. Unlike the *Freak Out!* album, *Lumpy Gravy* does not invite listeners to join in with the collective voices of the counterculture in a large reverberant performance space. Instead, it ridicules hippie banalities with stoner dialogues of people in enclosed spaces, contemplating freaky situations, such as living inside a drum, and mind-blowing, meaning-of-life ponderings, such as the significance of manes on ponies. These fragments of inane conversations were scripted and edited by Zappa to disrupt any sense of cohesive structure and are couched within a whirlwind of abruptly shifting musical segments in various styles at different tape speeds.

Zappa has described his work as “trying to use the weapons of a disoriented and unhappy society against itself,” hopeful that it could “do away with the Top Forty broadcasting format.”<sup>26</sup> Assembling a musical collage in which “the point is to draw attention to the material provenance of the elements,”<sup>27</sup> Zappa's magic act is a rearrangement of the raw material of pop culture, exposing it as vapid and empty. *Lumpy Gravy* begins and ends with generic examples of vapid instrumental pop songs played in their entirety, serving as a stable—yet empty—frame for the fragmented collage of voices and instruments contained within the body of the piece. By manipulating monologues about male obsessions with cars, girls, and jobs, intercut with manic percussion and rhythmic nasal snorts, Zappa alchemically transforms what he sees as social disorientation and unhappiness into a satisfying—to Zappa, at least—work of art. At the same time, he plays a trick on his audience as many of his stoned hippie listeners would laugh at the silliness even as it satirizes them. In interviews Zappa expressed satisfaction that his audiences did not understand how his tricks worked, insisting that his music was impossible for anyone to fully comprehend because of its extreme density of sonic sources, what Delville and Norris

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25. Ben Watson, “Frank Zappa as Dadaist: Recording Technology and the Power to Repeat,” in *The Frank Zappa Companion*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 157.

26. Zappa quoted in Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 91.

27. Watson, *Frank Zappa*, 91.

characterize as maximalist composition.<sup>28</sup> In discussing the impenetrability of his work, using as an example a track that included an obscure TV commercial jingle by Donny and Marie Osmond, Zappa compared it to junk sculpture:

Let's say I build a junk sculpture. You don't know what the pieces are or where they came from, but if the sculpture works when it's done, who gives a fuck? You don't have to know that's Donny and Marie."<sup>29</sup>

### A Séance in the Dark: "Revolution 9" as Magical Collage

"Revolution 9" from the Beatles' *White Album* has been described as "the world's most widely distributed avant-garde artefact."<sup>30</sup> The longest track ever released by the Beatles, this esoteric and inscrutable work of musique concrète served as a kind of countercultural magic act performed for an audience of millions, though many fans of the group may have listened to the track no more than once. Prominently featured as a climactic opus near the end of the group's most perplexing album, "Revolution 9" divides Beatles fans with many finding it unlistenable and others finding it endlessly fascinating. Composed primarily by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, along with George Harrison, the work was also divisive within the Beatles camp with Paul McCartney and George Martin unenthusiastic about its inclusion on the album.<sup>31</sup>

As an artist committed to bridging the gap between pop star and political activist,<sup>32</sup> Lennon "struggled to make the personal and the political come together."<sup>33</sup> The beginnings of that struggle are evident in Lennon's contributions to *The Beatles* and especially "Revolution 9" which, in spite of the track's inscrutability, is an early expression of a personal vision of revolutionary change. While "Revolution 1" appears to be Lennon's conscious thoughts about calls for violent revolution, "Revolution 9" is what Lennon himself described as "an unconscious picture" of revolution.<sup>34</sup> Although he later dismissed the work as "anti-revolution" during his political activist period of the early seventies, Lennon was clearly conceiving of revolution in 1968 as a liberation of the mind.<sup>35</sup> Recorded just three

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28. Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, and the Secret History of Maximalism* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005).

29. Zappa quoted in Watson, *Frank Zappa*, 92–93.

30. Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2007), 287.

31. Bob Spitz, *The Beatles: The Biography* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 784.

32. Paul Hodson, "John Lennon, Bob Geldof, and Why Pop Songs Don't Change the World," in *The John Lennon Companion*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2004), 199–200.

33. Jon Wiener, *Come Together: John Lennon in His Time* (London: Faber, 1985), 306.

34. The Beatles, *The Beatles Anthology* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 307.

35. MacDonald, 288.

weeks after recording *Two Virgins*, his first album collaboration with Yoko Ono, “Revolution 9” shows the influence of Ono and her Fluxus background in avant-garde art, the influence of Stockhausen’s musique concrète works of the time, as well as the influence of LSD culture, although this was after Lennon’s own experimentation with LSD had ceased. Soon to be under severe criticism from more radical critics at the time for his reticence toward violent revolution, Lennon held steadfastly to a more nuanced view of social change that lent itself to an ambiguous depiction of the dreaming state of mind. Lennon’s Blake-like vision made this track, not to mention the entire album, a treasure trove for clue-hunters and a truly interactive work.

As a child during the 1960s I was one of the many followers of the Beatles obsessed with clue-hunting. My brothers and I spent hours searching for hidden clues on all albums by the group, especially in hopes of finding references to Paul McCartney’s alleged death. Although I cherished my copy of *The Beatles*, I carefully peeled the white cover off the cardboard jacket to see if there was anything hidden underneath. Along with my brothers and friends, we scrutinized every song for clues, particularly the fragments of speech that appear in various places on the album, such as the mumbling voice at the end of “I’m So Tired,” the blisters on someone’s fingers at the end of “Helter Skelter,” and the mysterious howl at the end of “Long Long Long.” Our most important tool for decoding messages was a turntable with a neutral gear setting so that we could spin the vinyl backwards. “Revolution 9” was the track that we spent the most time trying to decode. I remember the most chilling moment in this occult game was discovering that the voice that recites the words “number nine” over and over at several points during the track sounds like “turn me on dead man” when played backwards. Coming from the composer of “I Am the Walrus” and “Glass Onion,” it is safe to assume that there were never any secret messages encoded into “Revolution 9” or any other track on the album. However, the trickster illusionist Lennon was certainly aware of the games that had developed among fans and played his own coy games with his songs at this time. In interpreting “Revolution 9,” rather than hunt for hidden clues, it is more productive to try to understand how the magical illusions operate in this complex recording.

As the longest song on the album appearing second to last, “Revolution 9” functions as a finale for the entire album and is carefully placed between two songs that help enhance the dream-like atmosphere with which the album concludes. Preceding this track is the dark-hued “Cry Baby Cry,” a haunting lullaby with nursery rhyme lyrics. The final verse of the song refers to spiritualist magic in a description of people attending a séance, but the spirit voices that seem to come out of nowhere are faked by hiding children playing a trick on the adults in attendance. Following the final verse and two choruses of “Cry Baby Cry,” the song cuts to a fragment of a song by Paul McCartney accompanied by Lennon and Starr, in which McCartney sings a mysterious line, “can you take me back,” that slowly fades out. The precise beginning of “Revolution 9” is ambiguous as the next sound that is heard is the



barely audible voice of George Martin quietly chatting in the studio before the incantation of “number nine” begins.

“Revolution 9” is built around the framing device of an audio engineer speaking the words, “number nine,” repeated over and over, serving as a kind of nonsense incantation. In an interview around the time of the release of the album, Lennon claimed it was randomly chosen and he was later surprised when he realized it was his lucky number and the date of his birthday.<sup>36</sup> One might look further for the numerological significance of the number nine as the highest single digit number before ten, what Crowley referred to as “the fullest development of the Force in its relation with the forces above it,”<sup>37</sup> symbolizing the near attainment of a breakthrough in knowledge corresponding to the idea of a revolution of the mind. The incantation is perhaps best understood as a nonsense abracadabra utterance that sets the appropriate mood for a performance of magic. The effect of the repeating voice at the outset, with its repetition of soft *en* and *em* sounds, is hypnotic and able to lull the listener into a dream-like state of mind as seemingly random and disjointed sounds begin to emerge. At the same time, the absurdity of this incantation could incite laughter or provoke listeners to decide to stop listening to a song that seems utterly pointless.

Listeners willing to go further into the track are confronted by an increasing density of sound fragments that rapidly appear and disappear, often panning in stereo between channels. Instrumental fragments include samples of orchestral recordings and samples of the Beatles themselves, mostly edits from an extended improvised coda that the group recorded during their sessions for the song “Revolution 1.” The instrumental sections run forward and backward to increase a sense of disorientation as fragments of spoken vocal phrases also fade in and out as they might in a dream. Most of these voices were recorded in the studio by Lennon and Harrison, with Ono’s vocalizations appearing near the end of the track. As if in a dream, the words spoken have no syntactic continuity, leaving listeners free to interpret by a kind of free association. Lennon himself supported the idea of allowing listeners to make of it what they will. An especially useful interpretative approach is to analyze the transformational techniques of *musique concrète* that led Lennon to believe in the usefulness of sound collage to depict revolution.

The revolution depicted here consists of the alteration of sounds from daily life and previously recorded music. Although sound alteration through tape editing, tape reversal, and speed change had been techniques of *musique concrète* practiced for several years by that time, in 1968 it was entirely new and startling for most listeners of popular music. Brief passages seem to be heavily manipulated, such as the tape loop that occurs at 3:01 in which a

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36. *Beatles Anthology*, 307.

37. Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth (Egyptian Tarot)* (Boston: Weiser Books, 2005), 193–94.

piece of music is merged with what sounds like a car horn to provide a steady rhythmic accent as the loop repeats several times. Powerful effects are also created simply by editing tape with very little sound modification. The sound of ladies' laughter appears and is then suddenly foregrounded as all other sounds drop out, giving a sense of rhythm to these brief bursts of laughter without any significant manipulation of the original sound source.

Like the children in the séance verse of "Cry Baby Cry," Lennon, Harrison, and Ono play a game of deceiving and teasing listeners with the ambiguity of voices and sounds. For example, it is not clear if the sound of a baby's voice at 1:49 is an actual infant or an adult mimicking an infant in the studio. Lennon's voice is heard moaning and groaning in what seems to be a mixture of both sexual ecstasy and a violent, frustrated urgency. Also ambiguous are the various samples of crowd noises that reinforce the theme of large-scale revolution, but with the context removed, it is not always clear what kinds of crowds these are. One crowd sample sounds like a rock concert audience, but at 2:02 a fainter sounding sample of a crowd chanting in unison suggests something sinister, such as a Nazi rally at Nuremberg. This could be heard as a subtle message linking popular music to fascism, a message that was later stated more explicitly on rock albums such as Peter Hammill's *Nadir's Big Chance* and the Residents' *Third Reich 'n' Roll*, the latter an extended musique concrète piece that satirizes 1960s pop songs.

Perhaps the most significant use of crowd noise is the sound of a football game that first appears at 5:02 and is then interspersed with sounds of flames, gunfire, and warplanes during the next minute of the track. Such a collage suggests that violent revolution is like a game of competition and may be a hint to listeners that searching for meaning in pop music is also nothing more than a frivolous and potentially dangerous game. Another link between popular culture and society can be inferred by the dialogue that is clearly foregrounded in a quiet moment at 6:29, when Lennon speaks of financial imbalance followed by popular dances the Watusi and the Twist, concluding with Harrison's voice uttering the words "El Dorado." Linking together economic instability, faddish social dances, and mythical cities of fortune invites any number of interpretations about human avarice and the implication of popular culture in society's materialist struggle. Or it could simply be dismissed as random nonsense.

"Revolution 9" then shifts into an extended coda that begins with another isolated phrase, "take this brother, may it serve you well," clearly spoken by Lennon in a deadpan voice, but in a way that suggests his mischievous wink. Yet another example of teasing listeners with deceptive clues, this phrase suggests that the track has provided plenty of material for fans to interpret with no specific meaning or magical code to crack. At 6:47 the overall timbre of the track completely changes, dominated by piano, static-filled radio broadcasting, and the voice of Yoko Ono in dialogue with the groggy voice of John Lennon. Although seemingly in conversation, the two are separated in space as Lennon's voice is

heard clearly inside a room where he appears to be listening to Ono's more distorted voice on a small speaker as if broadcast on a radio. Lennon mostly moans and groans in this section, but unlike the urgency of his moaning in the previous section, his voice here sounds weary and exhausted until Ono's voice utters the final enigmatic words: "if you become naked." As if offering a solution that will allow for revolution, the voice of the female suggests that only when one strips away all hopes for meaning will there be any chance of liberation. The track concludes with a sudden jump cut back to the football crowd from the earlier section and this gradually fades out, suggesting that the game continues endlessly. In 1968 one might have expected to hear chants of protest to suggest the ongoing revolution, but chanting from a sports match underscores the pointlessness of it all.

After the chaos of "Revolution 9" fades, the final track of the album, "Good Night," ushers in the sounds of a blissfully lush orchestra that extends the dream-like atmosphere of the previous track, but in a more soothing way. "Good Night" is almost as puzzling as "Revolution 9" and one wonders if this closing song is yet another illusionist trick. Satirizing the sounds of light orchestral popular music, Lennon urged producer George Martin to provide an arrangement that was as exaggerated and syrupy as possible, giving it the feel of a fake recording of stale, easy-listening music. However, Lennon's song itself was hardly fake, as it was supposedly written as a sincere lullaby to his son Julian. Perhaps the message of this postscript to "Revolution 9" cautions listeners not to take any of this album too seriously. The soothingly warm and trustworthy voice of Ringo Starr whispering good night at the end of the album assures listeners that the waking nightmare is over and sweet dreams may now commence.

Jann Wenner's lengthy review of *The Beatles* in 1968 was ecstatic in his praise of how the Beatles managed to synthesize all musical styles into a magnificent countercultural statement, singling out "Revolution 9" as making the meaning of the revolution obvious to anyone who listens closely using a pair of headphones. For Wenner, the leading shamans of popular music had clearly laid it down for all to see and "you are either hip to it, or you ain't."<sup>38</sup> But the magic act of *The Beatles* is that nothing is quite as it seems in this polystylistic record with conflicting messages and false clues that Whitley describes as postmodern in all its fragmented eclecticism.<sup>39</sup> "Revolution 9" casts the closing spell of the album with the abracadabra of the number nine incantation, lulling the listener into a dream state in which all is illusion and nothing is revealed.

Deceptive though it may be, the phenomenal is nevertheless made present in "Revolution 9" by the collage technique of musique concrete in which material of the

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38. Jann Wenner, "Beatles," *Rolling Stone* no. 24 (December 21, 1968): 10.

39. Ed Whitley, "The Postmodern White Album," in *The Beatles, Popular Music and Society*, ed. Ian Inglis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 105–25.

everyday world is transformed through the will of the aural magician. Like the Dadaist photomontage works of Raoul Hausmann in which “deadened material” from newspapers was transformed into something alive and magical,<sup>40</sup> the musique concrete method transforms fragments of ordinary conversations, such as talk about going to see the dentist, into mystical utterances that may shed light on the revolution of the mind. Although nothing is actually transformed, the revolutionary alchemy lies in creating the illusion of transformation. Believers in the transformational shamanic power of the Beatles may continue to hunt for clues while skeptics will continue to dismiss “Revolution 9” as a throwaway experiment. A more neutral, agnostic view of this magic would be to simply marvel at such an entertaining stunt of musical illusion carried out by the leading act in popular music at the time.

### Conclusion: Uneasy Visions of Heaven

The urgent desire for a quasi-mystical cultural change expressed by proponents of the counterculture was reflected in the work of musicians of the era who crafted pieces that resembled the practice of magic as a social critique. Although playfully dressing up as wizards and chanting “Om” seems less serious than actual magic-making, the fad for magic in rock struck a collective chord that resounded against the walls of the technocracy and galvanized the counterculture for the time being. But the more insidious and avant-garde magic practiced by some musicians in which meaning was obscured by esoteric lyrics, nonsense incantations, and sound collage ultimately turned in on itself as acts of deception that deceived the audience and may have also deceived the musicians themselves. The question of the sincerity of the magician posed by researchers of magic parallels the perpetual questioning of authenticity in the study of popular music. Styers speculates that the magician is either “a dupe who believes his own magical claims” or a “duplicitous fraud seeking to augment his personal status,” or even an imposter who “is his own dupe.”<sup>41</sup>

When one considers the apparent earnestness of so many of the musicians at the height of the counterculture, it is difficult to conclude that leading musicians such as John Lennon, Jim Morrison, or even the cynical Frank Zappa were self-conscious frauds out purely for personal gain. As believers in countercultural ideals, the dabbling in magic by musicians—like the dabbling in LSD—that pervaded the psychedelic period of rock, seems to have been especially useful for the artistic development of those who experimented with imaginative ways of making oppositional music. Just as Hugo Ball eventually rejected Dadaist magic to

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40. Wilson, 67.

41. Styers, *Making Magic*, 180.

focus more on politics,<sup>42</sup> John Lennon also broke his wand and committed himself to political activism. By the end of the 1960s, Lennon declared his disbelief of magic in his song “God” and began to refashion himself as a peace activist, writing and singing unequivocal songs of social consciousness. If the magical dabbling of the late sixties did little to achieve any miraculous social transformation, perhaps the most significant effect of revolutionary alchemy may have been the personal transformation of individuals, be they performers or audience members, through a process of self-deception that magic so effectively illuminates.

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42. White, *The Magic Bishop*, 97.

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