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Rebels Wit Attitude: Subversive Rock Humorists

Iain Ellis
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At first glance (or hearing), Chuck Berry, Madonna, Marilyn Manson, Nirvana, and Gretchen Wilson may seem to be as different as B flat is from F sharp. In *Rebels Wit Attitude*, Iain Ellis intelligently argues that each of these artists—and many others like them—have several important similarities: they are all subversive in either their lyrics, stage image, or packaging (sometimes all three at once); their music is geared toward young listeners; they all revel in a primal, often harsh, but always trailblazing rock sound; and they all exhibit diverse humorous elements in their music. Ellis, a music columnist for *Pop Matters,* aims to "scrutinize this humor: what it consists of, how it manifests itself, who and what it is targeting, and how it ultimately functions and affects society."

Ellis devotes a separate section to each decade of musical innovation, from the 1950s to the opening years of the twenty-first century. In each he discusses the most influential and most subversive rock humorists of the time. What emerges is a brainy, fun, and thought-provoking rollick through the last fifty years of music history.

For instance, in the section devoted to the 1950s, "The Fifties: Evolution to Revolution," Ellis features several groundbreaking musicians, beginning with Chuck Berry, "a quintessential all-American maverick," and the granddaddy of subversive rock humor. Ellis explores how the lyrics of toe-tapping Berry favorites such as "No Particular Place to Go," "Roll Over Beethoven," and "School Day," served as a thinly veiled clarion call to the youth of the time to throw off the stifling cloak of adult authority and revel in the new sound of the young—rock and roll.

In "The Nineties: Rock in Flux," Ellis examines the birth of modern alternative music with the emergence of Nirvana. Nirvana's mockery of the Generation X slacker culture in rock songs such as "Smells Like Teen Spirit," as well as the band's sarcastic skewering of their own mainstream fan base in "Serve the Servants," ("Teenage angst has paid off well / Now I'm old and bored.") underscore the dark, self-deprecating humor that characterized many subversive musicians of the '90s.

From Little Richard's uninhibited screaming to Jerry Lee Lewis' sexual innuendo-laced lyrics to Bob Dylan and wild glam-metal rockers like Alice Cooper and Kiss, *Rebels Wit Attitude* takes readers on a roller coaster ride through the highlights of modern music. What emerges is a greater understanding of the individual musicians and writers as more than enthralling entertainers and talented instrumentalists, but also as commentators on the ever-changing social and political landscape of the modern world.
MICHELLE KERNS (October 13, 2008)

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