Satan Sounds: The Ontology and Efficacy of the Sonic in Evangelical Anti-Rock Literature

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Abstract

In 1985, the United States Senate held a hearing to discuss the potentially deleterious effects of the decade's most popular rock songs. The hearing was convened at the behest of the Parents' Music Resource Center, an organization that sought to affix "parental advisory" labels to offensive albums. Over the course of five hours, the committee heard testimony from members of the PMRC and other sources. The PMRC's discursive position was clear from its testimonies: because rock lyrics discussed violence, sex, and drugs, they encouraged children to engage in these activities. Therefore, parents needed to be warned about these explicit messages before allowing their children to purchase these records.

  Any deliberation on the sound of rock is conspicuously absent from this official congressional discussion. However, the contemporaneous discourse of evangelical Christians concerned itself with the music's sonic qualities in addition to its lyrical content. Evangelical anti-rock literature from the 1980s critiqued rock's uniquely sonic dimensions and described how those sounds could adversely affect the physical, psychological, and spiritual condition of human beings.

  Through an analysis of several anti-rock texts, I argue that while both secular and religious criticisms of rock attack the genre's lyrics for promoting immoral messages, the evangelical Christian discourse tends to implicate the sound of the music as a message in itself, investing sound with the capacity to convey negative spiritual forces and to traverse the boundary between the physical and the spiritual. Sound possesses a dual ontology in this literature, as a simultaneously physical and spiritual medium.

Keywords

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Introduction

In September of 1985, the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held a hearing to discuss the potentially damaging effects of the decade's most popular rock songs. The hearing was convened at the behest of the Parents' Music Resource Center, an organization seeking to pressure record companies to affix "parental advisory" labels to offensive albums. Over the course of five hours, the committee heard testimony from members of the PMRC, members of the U.S. Congress, and several dissenting musicians. The PMRC's position on rock was clear from its own presentations: because rock lyrics prevalently discussed violence, sex, and drug use, they encouraged children to engage in these activities. Therefore, parents needed to be warned about this explicit content before purchasing – or allowing their children to purchase – these records.

Any deliberation on the sound of rock music was conspicuously absent from this official congressional discussion. The PMRC only indicted the semantic content of rock, that is, the meaning of the words that rock musicians used. However, the contemporaneous rhetoric emanating from evangelical Christian circles concerned itself with the music's sonic qualities in addition to its lyrical content. Fundamentalist evangelical literature from the 1980s critiqued rock's uniquely sonic dimensions and described how those sounds could adversely affect the physical, psychological, and spiritual condition of human beings.[1]

Through an analysis of several anti-rock texts, I argue two claims. Firstly, while both secular and religious criticisms of rock attack the genre's lyrics for promoting immoral messages, the evangelical Christian discourse tends to implicate the sound of the music as a message in itself. Evangelical anti-rock writers display an understanding of the sonic medium that (at least superficially) resonates with Marshall McLuhan's medium-concept. For McLuhan, it is the structural characteristics of a medium – not its apparent content – that determine that medium's effects.[2] Because of this commitment, these evangelicals invest rock music's sound with the capacity to convey negative spiritual forces and to traverse the boundary between the physical and the spiritual. Indeed, sound possesses a dual ontology in these

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[1] A deep investigation into the ontological status of the human in evangelical Christian cosmology is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth briefly addressing an ambiguity that arises in several of my primary sources, and that the reader will no doubt notice in this article. Many of these evangelical texts seem to consider the human as ontologically tripled, consisting of a physical body, mind (or "soul" or psyche), and spirit. Evangelicals might point to First Thessalonians 5:23 as biblical evidence for this position: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray to God that your whole spirit and soul and body [τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα] be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This complicates the dualistic conception of the human familiar to some branches of classical philosophy. In his treatise on this fraught topic, the reverend J. B. Heard writes that "the distinction between soul and body is obvious, and is as old as philosophy itself. But what of the distinction between soul and spirit? It is this which distinguishes Christian psychology from that of the [other philosophical] schools" (ix). At the same time, he recognizes that the conflation of soul and spirit has occurred at various points throughout Christian history: "From attending to this distinction between Psyche and Pneuma [spirit], the Greek fathers seem to me to have reached that golden mean, which was lost in Latin theology generally, and which even the Reformers, Lutheran and Calvinist, alike failed to reach" (viii). As inheritors of this ambiguity, evangelical anti-rock texts sometimes use murky language when discussing human ontology. "Soul" and "spirit" are sometimes clearly distinguished, but at other times they seem to be conflated. For more background, see John Bickford Heard, *The Tripartite Nature of Man: Body, Soul, and Spirit* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1875), ix-xvi.

[2] McLuhan writes that "the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium." Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 9.

writings, as a simultaneously physical and metaphysical substance. Secondly, I argue that this anti-rock literature provides a subject-specific glimpse into an auditory culture whose commitments descend from much earlier Christian listening practices. I trace the development of this auditory culture in pre-modern Christianity, eighteenth-century revivalist spirituality, and mid-twentieth-century evangelical racializations of sound, ultimately arriving at the 1980s.

My primary sources for this article share several common features. All are book-length texts printed by small Christian publishers and distributed primarily through churches and Christian bookstores. Most were published between 1980 and 1990. Additionally, all express a fundamentalist evangelical Protestant worldview, meaning that they embody a biblically literalist and socially conservative Christian faith whose theology embraces personal revelation from God and prioritizes proselytization and conversion.[3] While these texts represent the most reactionary religious stance against rock music during this period, it is important to note that many evangelicals embraced rock music styles. For example, the largely evangelical Jesus movement of the 1960s often turned to rock music for the purposes of attracting young people, and many later evangelical churches continued this trend.[4] Thus, one cannot create a monolith out of the evangelical reception of rock, as these Christians were often some of the most enthusiastic adopters of the rock sound. In this paper, I limit my inquiry specifically to the critical side of rock's reception among evangelicals, focusing on those writers who resisted and attacked the music that others found useful for proselytization.

Methodologically, my approach is akin to what Michael Lynch calls an ontography: a "historical and ethnographic investigation of particular world-building and world-sustaining practices that [does] not begin by assuming a general picture of the world."[5] While I am interested in uncovering sound's categories of being in evangelical literature, I concede that these ontological categories are not transcendent but rather historically constituted within a particular community. As Brian Kane clarifies, "ontologies emerge by capturing the ways that agents and actors understand, totalize, substantialize, and engage with the shared historical, geographic, cultural, scientific, and political situations in which they find themselves."[6] Unlike the classical conception of ontology, in this article I treat ontology as subsequent to (and thus a product of) epistemology, not describing how the world objectively is, but describing the categories by which some people come to understand the world.

The Power of the Beat

Any investigation into evangelical anti-rock literature must begin with the concept of "the beat." For these writers, the rock beat possesses several specific qualities: it is typically played on drums, it is overtly loud and repetitious, and often involves syncopation. Evangelical writers contend that such a beat can

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[3] Consider Tanya Luhrmann's anthropological definition: "[Evangelicalism] is typically understood as implying three commitments: belief in the literal or near-literal truth of the Bible; belief that one can be saved only by choosing a personal relationship with Christ or being 'born again'; and belief that one should, to some extent, evangelize and share the good news of salvation with others." T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 13.

[4] John Haines, "The Emergence of Jesus Rock: On Taming the 'African Beat,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (2011): 230-231. Also see his discussion of "Jesus rock" in Haines, "The Emergence of Jesus Rock," 248ff.

[5] Michael Lynch, "Ontography: Investigating the Production of Things, Deflating Ontology," *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 444.

[6] Brian Kane, "The Fluctuating Sound Object," in *Sound Objects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 67.

communicate demonic forces into human bodies. As evidence for these claims, writers often turn to the apparent resemblance between rock music and "pagan" ritual music.[7] Preacher Lowell Hart asserts that "pagan dances and rituals are always accompanied by the incessant beat of drums. Rhythm plays a major role in these demonic activities."[8] Like "heathen" drumming, "rock has a heavy, incessant, throbbing beat, the same beat that people in primitive cultures use in their demonic rites and dances. If the beat is monotonous enough and the volume loud enough it can induce a type of hypnosis."[9] By hypnosis, Hart means that the drumbeat overcomes the mental faculties, "bypasses the mind and works directly on the body."[10] The rhetoric here fixates on the loss of subjective control and the imposition of sonic control. Listeners cannot help but surrender their cognitive inhibitions to the sensual animation of the body through sound. Indeed, it is ultimately "the rhythm that controls the body's action" when listening to rock music.[11]

However, this sonic control of the body is not merely a physical phenomenon. Rocker-turned-evangelist Jeff Godwin claims that "music is a spiritual creation," and thus "it will always strike a positive or negative chord within our spirits. Enough evidence now exists to clearly show that when rock is played, our bodies, minds, and spirits suffer."[12] Related to this, he states that the beat of rock "destroy[s] the body," "hypnotizes the mind," and "attracts evil spirits."[13] Such a statement reveals the spiritual dimension of what at first appears to be only physical or psychological. There is a continuity and a porousness between physicality and spirituality in these evangelical descriptions of rock sound. The specific sonic qualities of the drumbeat not only have physical ramifications, but those ramifications are effected by demonic spiritual forces conjured by the sounds themselves. Godwin explains that "beats and counter-rhythms play a vital role in getting demons into the bodies of the [demon] worshippers."[14]

Other statements from the primary literature support the spiritual efficacies of musical sound even in positive contexts. Both Godwin and Hart include a Biblical episode between David and King Saul as evidence for the spiritual power of sound.[15] In this story, an evil spirit torments Saul, so he calls upon the musician-shepherd David to ameliorate the situation. By playing soothing tones on his lyre, David drives the demon away from the king.[16] The inclusion of this story in anti-rock texts indicates two things. Firstly, sound can act as a medium between physical and spiritual realities in both positive and negative ways. Secondly, the timbre, qualities, and associations of the sound matter in determining whether that sound will invoke positive or negative spiritual responses.

Based on the associations and powers ascribed to rock's sound by these writers, we can begin to sketch out an evangelical ontology of sound. On the one hand, sound is certainly physical. These writers

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[7] The racialized history of these associations is touched upon in the "Historical Precedents" section of this article below.

[8] Lowell Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed* (Huntingdon Valley, PA: Salem Kirban Inc., 1981), 71.

[9] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 94.

[10] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 103.

[11] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 77.

[12] Jeff Godwin, *Dancing with Demons: The Music's Real Master* (Chino, CA: Chick Publications, 1988), 10-11.

[13] Godwin, *Dancing with Demons*, 13.

[14] Godwin, *Dancing with Demons*, 125.

[15] Godwin, *What's Wrong with Christian Rock?* (Chino, CA: Chick Publications, 1990), 28-29. Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 48.

[16] The original biblical passage is First Samuel 16:23.

tie the production of rock music to material bodies and instruments emitting sound waves, and these sound waves have material consequences. But as we saw, they do not stop at mere materiality. Rather, evangelical writers insist that rock music's physical origins and effects are concomitant with spiritual origins, powers, and entities. Claims of demonic communication and transference via rock music explicitly indicate that sound is a spiritual medium. As a medium, it traverses the porous boundary between matter and spirit, implying that the ontology of sound is twofold in this evangelical discourse. It fluidly embodies both the being-categories of the physical and the spiritual. As we will see, this dual ontology of sound gives "satanic" sounds (like those of rock music) particular abilities that they usually do not possess in more secular discourses.

First Case Study: Christian Rock

The evangelical reactions to Christian rock and backward masking provide some of the best evidence for sound's unique efficacy in this discourse.[17] Jeff Godwin tends to be tenaciously McLuhanian in his arguments against Christian rock, advocating that the physical-spiritual medium of rock sound possesses a demonic power regardless of the words being sung. As he claims, "[music] is never neutral… music is not a piece of wood or chunk of steel waiting to be used / abused by whoever picks it up. Music has a life of its own" since it "is a spiritual creation."[18] Such a claim insists upon a fundamental difference between a purely physical medium (wood or steel) and a medium that is both physical and spiritual. The physical medium is entirely passive, while the sound of rock music is living and active, inevitably transferring a spiritual content.[19] Godwin's assertion that music is never neutral – a claim repeated in his other writings[20] – also indicates this distinction. In Godwin's cosmology, musical sounds must be either godly or satanic, and this must be judged based on the sonic qualities of the music, not on the semantics of the lyrics. He reinforces this by stating that "even without words, rock is a loud, grating, obnoxious blast of confusion and dissonance. It instantly projects an ungodly message, no matter what words may be included."[21]

In *The Devil's Disciples*, Godwin makes his McLuhanian commitments even more explicit. He writes that "there is a famous phrase that goes like this: 'the medium is the message.'… I maintain that the heavy metal 'sound' is a message into and unto itself."[22] Here, the medium of sound deterministically dictates how the listener responds. Godwin explains how simply shouting "praise God" over the crashing and banging of rock causes the ostensibly "good message" to be "obscured by the medium."[23] The results of this process are both physical and spiritual. On one side, Godwin insists that "there is a spiritual

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[17] A backward mask (or "backmask") is a recorded message on a rock album that is only intelligible when played backwards. I explore this in greater detail below.

[18] Godwin, *Dancing with Demons*, 10.

[19] Godwin, *Dancing with Demons*, 18. Here, the "rhythmic beat" forms "a battering ram that smashes into the listener's mind and spirit."

[20] For example, see Godwin, *What's Wrong with Christian Rock?*, 28-29. In these pages, Godwin also recapitulates the story of David and King Saul.

[21] Godwin, *Dancing with Demons*, 245.

[22] Godwin, *The Devil's Disciples: The Truth about Rock* (Chino, CA: Chick Publications, 1985), 280.

[23] Godwin, *The Devil's Disciples*, 280.

power to this music, a power that does not come from God. Some try to clean it up, tone it down, or even claim it for the Lord, but rock music never changes, no matter how it's perfumed."[24] According to Godwin, attempting to use rock music as a medium to convey Christian morals is futile. The spirit of the music itself is satanic, and therefore it will communicate satanic forces regardless of lyrical content. On the physical side, "all rock music promotes one thing: animal lust."[25] These sounds act directly on the body, bypassing the rational control of the mind and leading to unrestrained sexual activity. In this evangelical discourse, the loss of control of one's physical body is heavily enmeshed with the spiritual control exerted by demonic entities. In other words, some spiritual force is always in control, whether that be God and his angels or Satan and his demons. The apparent loss of physical control is evidence for a spiritual control effected through sound. Because these ramifications are tied to the qualities of sound and not to the meaning of words, Christian rock becomes an oxymoron in Godwin's worldview. Christian and secular rock use the same medium – the sound of rock – and thus communicate the same negative effects.

Other writers express a similar anxiety regarding Christian rock. Hart, for example, begins his book with an account of a Christian rock concert, in which "the singers… were sincerely trying to get a message [of God] across. But again, the medium contradicted the message."[26] Throughout Hart's discussion, certain sonic features of rock music are suffused with demonic power, and this spiritual power can manifest physically through the body, overriding even the most edifying of lyrics. As he states, "no matter how doctrinally sound the words are, rock, by its nature, can never be used to communicate spiritual truth…. Rock music and godly things just don't go together."[27] Similar to Godwin's account, Hart links rock's sound to both "sensual movements"[28] and the "reality of demonic activity,"[29] indicating the dual ontological status of sound and its power to influence both physical and spiritual domains.

This may raise the question of what kinds of music would be acceptably godly within this evangelical discourse. Besides traditional Protestant hymns, classical music is given some treatment in these texts. Hart provides a list of acceptable classical pieces that, without words, provide spiritual edification to the listener.[30] This list includes everything from Bach concertos and Mozart opera overtures to the symphonies of Brahms. However, not every piece of classical music passes the evangelical sonic test. Classical music that is dissonant, repetitive, or rhythmically propulsive has the capacity to produce negative effects like rock music. For example, Maurice Ravel's *Bolero* is criticized for its sensual and trance-like rhythms.[31] This critique should come as no surprise given the ontology and spiritual efficacy that the evangelical discourse ascribes to sound. This discourse implies that music will communicate the spiritually good only when its sonic qualities reflect certain vague principles (balance, harmoniousness,

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[24] Godwin, *Dancing with Demons*, 8.

[25] Godwin, *What's Wrong with Christian Rock?*, 29.

[26] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 25.

[27] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 112.

[28] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 77.

[29] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 76.

[30] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 150-52.

[31] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 149.

moderation) associated with good spiritual practices. According to pastor Jacob Aranza, when musicians truly turn to Christ, then God will change "both their music and their message."[32]

Second Case Study: Backward Masking

Evangelical accounts of backward masking present another instantiation of the unique being and power of sound in this discourse. A backmask is a message recorded onto some physical medium that is only consciously intelligible when the recording is played backwards. Both the PMRC and evangelical writers discuss the deleterious effects of backward masking, citing a plethora of pseudoscience regarding the ability of the human brain to decode backward recordings.[33] Both subscribed to the idea that backmasks could be subconsciously deciphered and thus negatively influence behavior. In evangelical literature, however, the origin of the backmask itself – as a sonic phenomenon – emphasizes the dual ontology of the sound of rock. Thus, these writers tend to describe the backmask as a demonic phenomenon that manifests simultaneously as a physical phenomenon.

For example, the backmask is often considered to be the literal voices of demonic spirits. Jeff Godwin states that "the voices we hear on these songs in reverse are actually the sounds of the demons themselves!"[34] His justification for this comes from his survey of recordings of live rock performances, to which no overdubs or studio production effects were added. By studying these recordings in reverse, Godwin claims to have uncovered secret satanic messages that, given the nature of the recordings, could not have been planned by the musicians. Rather, these messages are "backmasked broadcasts from hell."[35] When musicians begin to play rock music, they invite evil spiritual forces to communicate through sound. Thus, the rock sound spiritually conjures the backmask into existence, and the backmask is the physical trace of spiritual activity. Because the rock sound is satanic by its nature, Godwin equally critiques the apparent presence of backmasks on Christian rock records. As he says, "if backmasks are on 'Christian' rockers' songs (and they are), then something's drastically wrong somewhere. A doorway has been opened for satanic manipulation with or without the group's permission. By messing with Satan's music, they have left themselves wide open for all kinds of demonic devices beyond their control."[36] Here, sound generates an opening that connects material human musicking to the demonic spiritual realm. It also reveals the assumption of spiritual control that is caused by rock's sound by virtue of its dual ontological status. The intentionality of the Christian rock musician is almost completely irrelevant. By using Satan's sounds, they invite negative spiritual forces that manifest physically on their recordings in the form of satanic backward messages. Though the demons' activity has been captured in the physical medium of the LP, this does not mean that it ceases to partake in a spiritual ontology. When a listener plays the record, the sound of the backmask (whether consciously perceived by the listener or not) allows

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[32] Jacob Aranza, *Backward Masking Unmasked: Backward Satanic Messages of Rock and Roll Exposed* (Shreveport, LA: Huntington House Inc., 1983), 57.

[33] John Brackett, "Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide: The Formation of an Anti-Rock Discourse in the United States during the 1980s," *American Music* 36, no. 3 (2018): 278ff.

[34] Godwin, *The Devil's Disciples*, 151.

[35] Godwin, *The Devil's Disciples*, 157.

[36] Godwin, *What's Wrong with Christian Rock?*, 152.

the negative spiritual power "to break out against the listener."[37] For this reason, Godwin pleads with us to "never, ever listen to such records for research purposes without prayers for protection and the power to bind those demon spirits!"[38]

Though their accounts are not as detailed as Godwin's, Aranza and the Peters brothers share a similar commitment to the spiritual dimension of backward masking. In *Why Knock Rock?*, the Peters brothers acknowledge that "many [backward] messages have been inserted intentionally, while others remain a mystery."[39] Indeed, none of these evangelical writings deny the fact that some backmasks are intentionally placed by the musicians. What separates the evangelical discourse from other discourses is its belief in humanly unintentional – and therefore demonically produced – backmasks. The Peters brothers go on to clarify that "the effort it would take to say something in English which would mean one thing forward and another backward is incredible! And yet, cases apparently exist."[40] This is because "the genius of satanic influence has been a factor in some albums. This would explain the many times that words spoken forward say something else entirely when played backward."[41] Likewise, Aranza claims that "some groups that have backward masking on their albums or songs don't realize that though they have not intentionally placed backward satanic messages in their music, they are simply 'pawns' in the hands of Satan."[42] Both Aranza and the Peters brothers believe that the sonic power of rock is simultaneously physical and spiritual, allowing a connection between these two realms that results in the presence of demonic messages regardless of human intent (or "forward" lyrical content, for that matter). From these passages, we can see that the evangelical interpretation of the backmask reveals a commitment to sound's dual ontology and thus to its heightened spiritual efficacy.

Historical and Theological Precedents of Evangelical Audition

The evangelical discourse explored in this article can be traced historically to older Christian auditory practices. In *The Presence of the Word*, Walter Ong discusses the importance of sound in early Christian communities, exploring the "primacy which this [Christian] economy [of revelation] accords to the word of God and thus in some mysterious way to sound itself."[43] In the auditory culture of early Christianity, the sonicity of God's word has several unique consequences. For example, the preaching of the gospel and the faith that results from it are tied to the sonic word. As Ong states, in preaching "the human word exists in a mysterious connection with the divine."[44] The gospel is sounded forth by the physical human voice, but that physical sound is simultaneously a godly spiritual substance that moves the spirits of

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[37] Godwin, *The Devil's Disciples*, 158.

[38] Godwin, *The Devil's Disciples*, 158.

[39] Dan Peters and Steve Peters, *Why Knock Rock?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 170.

[40] Peters and Peters, *Why Knock Rock?*, 173.

[41] Peters and Peters, *Why Knock Rock?*, 173.

[42] Aranza, *Backward Masking Unmasked*, 4.

[43] Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 12.

[44] Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 13.

other humans.[45] More broadly, one might say that sound makes sensible the always already imbricated presence of the spiritual within the physical domain. This ability to mediate between the physical and the spiritual gives sound special powers of communication, truthfulness, and reality-manifestation.[46] In this cosmology, spiritual reality is more real than the material world with which humans regularly interact. Thus, it follows that sound, having the capacity to access this higher metaphysical plane, also has the capacity to communicate truth more reliably than visual phenomena.[47]

By virtue of these features, the Christian cosmology tends to treat sound as a spiritually efficacious medium, not simply an ephemeral sensory stimulation. In this auditory culture, the sonic word of God reveals God's subjective presence. But the sounded word is not merely intelligible; it also powerfully affects the hearer. As Ong argues, "in the Bible, …the word of God often refers to an exercise of divine power. God's word is efficacious."[48] More generally, "sound signals the present use of power," compelling the listener to act.[49] The commitment to sound's physical-spiritual being that one finds in Ong's account resonates strongly with the discourse expressed in evangelical anti-rock literature of the 1980s. Perhaps this is surprising, given that Ong himself considered this kind of aurality to be a feature of "early oral-aural man" (Christian or otherwise) and not of our current "visualist" culture. Ong's grand narrative is one of desacralization and disenchantment, but such a narrative is too simplistic (and has been roundly critiqued).[50] Instead of locating this auditory culture only in the distant and lost past, I find it more interesting to address the persistence of this kind of culture in an era of increased modernization and secularization. In other words, when it comes to Christian discourses about sound's ontology, it appears that these discourses still exist into the late twentieth century, underlying and informing the deeply held convictions of the evangelical anti-rock movement. Ong's narrative of early Christian audition – though flawed – gives insight into the historical and theological conditions for such beliefs.

Leigh Eric Schmidt traces this auditory culture into the modern era. His book *Hearing Things* is primarily concerned with revivalist, vernacular Christianity during the First Great Awakening, a movement that is in many ways the ideological precursor of twentieth-century American evangelicalism.[51] He investigates the "devotional ordinariness of hearing voices, the everyday reverberation of spoken scriptures, and the expectedness of a conversational intimacy with Jesus (as well as angels and demons) in pietistic Christian circles."[52] In these vernacular traditions, the expectation of hearing the voices and sounds of spiritual entities supports an understanding of sound possessing

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[45] A commonly cited biblical passage for this belief is Romans 10:17: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

[46] Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 33.

[47] Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 111.

[48] Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 182.

[49] Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 112-13.

[50] For just three brief critiques of Ong's grand narrative, see Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 8; and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 15ff.

[51] For an overview of the historical and theological connections between eighteenth-century revivalism and twentieth-century evangelicalism, see Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 9-15.

[52] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, vii.

a dual ontological status. This might manifest as a divine call, when a common person would hear the voice of God exhorting them to become a preacher of the gospel.[53] As Schmidt explains, the regularity of hearing spirits in vernacular Christianity implies a metaphysics of the senses, in which the "bodily [physical] senses [had] been prepared to become spiritual senses."[54] The physical ears, ostensibly designed to discern physical vibrations, were understood to be able to discern metaphysical presences as well. In much Protestant Christianity of the time, the ears had to be carefully regulated since they were inlets that mediated physical and spiritual realities. Thus, the ears were the location of divine-human encounters, in which "the spirit and the flesh were under constant negotiation." As Schmidt makes clear, "sounds and words were the apt media of such in-between [physical-spiritual] experiences."[55]

While hearing the voice of God represents a powerful instantiation of the power of sound in Christian cosmology, the voice of the devil is even more relevant for the evangelical anti-rock writers examined here. Long before anti-rock preachers condemned the sound of rock for its demon-conjuring power, similar concerns were already present in revivalist Christianity. Schmidt explains that "the devil's voice often had a quite tangible reality for the devout" and that "from cases of possession as well as popular tales of demonic encounters, the devout… had definite expectations about the guttural sound of the devil's voice."[56] Significantly, the devil's voice had a distinct timbral characterization. Though known for their capacity for deception and dissimulation,[57] Satan and his demons could still be recognized by the sound of their voices, even when they seemed to be suggesting something godly to the devout listener. The guttural sounds of demons contrasted strikingly with the "harmonious sounds" that Christians were apt to hear when they were truly communing with God.[58] One can see this same concern recapitulated in evangelical literature from the 1980s, in which the sound of Christian rock, despite its positive lyrical content, still faced scathing criticism for its unholy timbres. In general, Schmidt's arguments help to explain and contextualize the twentieth-century evangelical's "readiness to hear."[59] While the preconditions for this tendency were based upon a presumed sonic intimacy with Jesus Christ, those same conditions also afforded the audition of negative, devilish spiritual phenomena manifesting in the material world. Given their shared commitment to sound's dual ontology and to the spiritual efficacies of sound, we see that evangelical anti-rock sentiments of the 1980s can be traced back to these vernacular revivalist foundations and anxieties.

In the twentieth century, the evangelical propensity for spiritual audition intersected with a distinctly racialized discourse in the white reception of African American-derived popular musics.[60] This discourse largely revolved around a white framing of black culture as threatening, excessive, and spiritually suspect. Analyzing the history of black singing voices in the New World, Lindon Barrett

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[53] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 39.

[54] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 47.

[55] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 50, 56, 57 (respectively).

[56] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 59, 60 (respectively).

[57] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 59.

[58] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 218.

[59] Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 70.

[60] A full discussion of the white reception of black music in the twentieth century is beyond the scope of this article. The three following paragraphs are merely a schematic overview of the interaction between the specifically evangelical sonic discourse and the broader racialized discourses surrounding African American musics.

observes that, "forcibly, blackness is positioned as excess in relation to a more 'legitimate' and significant presence known as whiteness."[61] As they did with jazz in the 1920s, white critics (both Christian and not) often linked rock music to the presumed moral impurity and uninhibitedness of African American culture. Fundamentalist evangelical writers in the 1950s and 1960s explicitly racialized the sonic qualities of rock.[62] As Randall Stephens explains, "many whites feared that the new wild, mixed-race music – along with the intermingling of black and white bodies on the dance floor – would overturn their evangelical Zion."[63] Due to various socio-economic factors during this period (including the expanded availability of commercially recorded music), black and white youth were frequenting the same venues and consuming the same music, contributing to widespread white fears of integration and miscegenation. In response, many evangelicals portrayed African Americans as savage and pagan primitives, whose musical traditions would corrupt the decency of white teenagers.[64] Anti-rock preachers such as David Noebel and Bob Larson couched their critiques of rock's sound (especially its rhythmic characteristics) in explicitly racist and anti-left rhetoric. Writing in 1966, Noebel exclaimed that "[rock] music is a designed reversion to savagery!"[65] For evangelist Bob Larson, "the power of rock awakened uncontrollable sexual urges in unsuspecting young people, urges more pronounced in blacks."[66] These evangelicals identified rock's blackness with sonic excess and spiritual perversion, drawing a connection between sound, spirituality, and race. Given its already established inclination to associate sound with metaphysical reality, the evangelical anti-rock discourse of the 1950s and 60s understood rock's "wild" beat as an indication of the moral and spiritual dangers posed by black people. It condemned rock's blackness together with its sound, easily bolstering the pervasive racist views of the period.

By the 1980s, the racialized discourse around rock presented by evangelical writers had largely been repressed or made implicit, sublimated into a more purely sonic discourse. While evangelicals of a previous generation would denigrate the "jungle drumming" of black people,[67] evangelical anti-rock literature of the Reagan era pursued a different strategy. As we saw earlier, criticisms of the musics of "heathen" and "demon-worshipping" people still proliferate in the texts of writers like Godwin and Hart. However, explicit reference to the race of these peoples is now mostly (if not entirely) absent. Also absent is the overt fear of racial integration, replaced now by vaguer rhetoric regarding mixture with the satanic secular world. But by recapitulating many of the same arguments from the 1950s and 60s (often through direct citation), these anti-rock writers covertly maintained the racist implications of the earlier generation while denying its terminology.

One could say that the racialized rhetoric against rock had been sanitized, but its arguments remained structurally intact. Certain evangelical writers of the 1980s acknowledged and attempted to

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[61] Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 56.

[62] Randall J. Stephens, *The Devil's Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 90.

[63] Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 17.

[64] Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 92. See also Haines, "The Emergence of Jesus Rock," 230.

[65] David A. Noebel, *Rhythm, Riots, and Revolution: An Analysis of the Communist Use of Music* (Tulsa, OK: Christian Crusade Publications, 1966), 78.

[66] This is addressed in Haines, "The Emergence of Jesus Rock," 234. The text in question is Bob Larson, *Rock and Roll: The Devil's Diversion* (McCook, NE: Larson Publications, 1967).

[67] For further context, see Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 87ff.

reject the racist rhetoric of earlier preachers. For example, at the end of their book the Peters brothers largely disavow the "African beat" theory: "That rock and its 'evil beat' originated with the slaves of Africa is a racist notion which will not stand up."[68] In a slightly different approach, Leonard Seidel writes that "a discussion on this subject [of the rock beat] must be predicated on the knowledge that in no way do I intend to demean the music of the American black."[69] The Peters brothers abstract the sound of rock away from its production by any particular racial group, condemning the effects of rock sound without invoking that sound's previous associations. Seidel still links rock to African American (and African) musical traditions, and he certainly commits himself to criticizing the demonic spiritual effects of rock's sound.[70] But he seeks to divorce his arguments from racial rhetoric, praising black spirituals, and blaming the demons for the beat instead of the people. By either ignoring or disavowing, evangelical anti-rock writers of the 1980s mostly sought to distance themselves from rock's racist reception history. But by occluding yet holding on to many of the same racialized tropes and arguments, many of these writers strayed into an implicitly racist critique of rock's sound. This implicit racialization did not contradict the dual ontology of sound, as evangelical Christians were already primed to hear negative spiritual forces in certain kinds of sonic phenomena. These phenomena were now only coincidentally affiliated with African American-derived popular music, instead of being caused by blackness.

　　To come full circle, we can observe that the evangelical commitment to sound's dual ontology is absent from the ostensibly secular rhetoric of the PMRC. For the PMRC, the words of rock songs were wholly responsible for those songs' negative effects. As John Brackett points out, "members of the PMRC were concerned about the mental and moral well-being of children and teenagers who were repeatedly exposed to sexually explicit, violent, and occult-based lyrics and images in rock music and videos."[71] Tipper Gore, one of the founders of the PMRC, makes this lyrics-based critique clear. She writes that "for many malleable teens and preteens who are searching for identity and who are beset by conflicts about authority, drugs, sex, religion, and education, a big dose of heavy metal messages like these can be extremely harmful."[72] In Gore's view, immoral lyrics can psychologically persuade children to embrace immoral behavior. At no point does she put forward a purely sound-based critique. However, for a fundamentalist evangelical like Lowell Hart, "it mattered little what the words were. The beat was there. That's all that counted."[73] Popular music scholar Anna Nekola has similarly observed this evangelical-secular split regarding sound, which she traces to the rhetoric of 1960s preachers. Evangelicals such as David Noebel and Bob Larson were arguing that "not only was the culture of [rock] music morally threatening, but that the sounds themselves were inherently dangerous and fundamentally evil, and thus could harm the bodies and minds – and souls – of listeners."[74] Rhetoric regarding the spiritual

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[68] Peters and Peters, *Why Knock Rock?*, 196.

[69] Leonard J. Seidel, *Face the Music: Contemporary Church Music on Trial* (Springfield, VA: Grace Unlimited Publications, 1988), 29.

[70] For example, see Seidel, *Face the Music*, 19: "Not only is man's spirit affected, his physical body is as well." Here, Seidel clearly acknowledges the physical-spiritual detriments of rock's sound, implying its dual ontology.

[71] Brackett, "Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide," 285.

[72] Tipper Gore, "The Cult of Violence," in *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), reproduced in *The Rock History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 231.

[73] Hart, *Satan's Music Exposed*, 140.

[74] Anna Nekola, "'More Than Just a Music': Conservative Christian Anti-Rock Discourse and the U.S. Culture Wars," *Popular Music* 32, no. 3 (2013): 408.

efficacy of rock's sound, the hypnosis of the beat, and sound's ability to conjure demons permeates these earlier writings.[75] For example, Noebel provides a chart contrasting the specifically sonic characteristics of "good music" and "rock 'n' roll." While good, spiritually edifying music is "accurate," "well-ordered," and "natural," rock is "unnatural," and possesses "constant repetition," a "wild sound," and the "complete dominance of the 'beat.'"[76] Such characterizations are cited by evangelical anti-rock texts of the 1980s, as we have seen. Nekola also points out the pertinent distinction between "a specifically religious understanding of musically inherent rhythmic power" and ostensibly non-religious anti-rock critiques, which "locate the danger of the music… in [its] libertine lyrics and cultural connotations of sex, violence, and rebellion."[77] I would attribute this to the evangelical writers' steadfast commitment to sound's twofold being-status, an ontology that results – as the primary sources attest – in the power of the sonic medium to summon spiritual forces into the physical realm.

    My analysis in this article has begun to show how the evangelical critiques of rock music can be contextualized within a longer history of Christian audition. My arguments leave many paths open for further exploration. It is clear that there was considerable cross-pollination between Christian and conservative secular discourses during the 1980s. Not every discursive contrast is as stark as the PMRC Senate hearing (possibly constrained by the separation of church and state) versus evangelical anti-rock literature (intended specifically for a devoted Christian audience).[78] This was also the era of "satanic panic," a phenomenon that suffused American culture and media regardless of religious affiliation, and that branched out into domains far beyond music.[79] It would be intriguing to investigate more hybrid discourses on rock music from this period to see what other kinds of sonic ontologies might emerge. Given my limited number of sources, I can only say that this article has given a narrow slice of the complicated ideological landscape surrounding rock music in 1980s America.

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Philip Bixby is a doctoral student in musicology at Yale University. He received a bachelor's degree in music from the University of Texas at Austin and a master's degree in musicology from the University of California, Irvine. His research has ranged across various topics of the twentieth century, including aesthetic theories of modernism, the music of György Ligeti, the musicological reception of Theodor Adorno, and the style history of rock music. He plays the piano and maintains side-interests in literature and cinema.

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[75] Nekola, "More Than Just a Music," 413-14.

[76] David A. Noebel, *The Beatles: A Study in Drugs, Sex, and Revolution* (Tulsa, OK: Christian Crusade Publns, 1969), 57-58.

[77] Nekola, "More Than Just a Music," 420.

[78]. For an overview of various politically conservative responses to rock music, see Lawrence Grossberg, "The Framing of Rock: Rock and the New Conservatism," in *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 1993). While his criteria are not based on spirituality or ontology, Grossberg does coincidentally place the fundamentalist Christian response in a different category from the PMRC response. The former exemplifies a total rejection of rock, while the latter attempts to discriminate between acceptable and unacceptable manifestations of rock. Grossberg, "The Framing of Rock," 195-96.

[79]. For a full account of this phenomenon, see Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).

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