

## Famous Willy's State of Rock and Roll Address

*"Rock and roll has now become a conformity, which is completely anti-nature to rock and roll; therefore, it's dead." -Laetitia Sadier from Stereolab*

My fellow rock and rollers,

It is 1999. Scholars have prepared for the millenium by creating Death of Art and End of History theories. Prophets on Jenny Jones herald the end of time. No matter how hard you try to fight it, you are doomedly postmodern. The (w)hole of Western Culture doesn't graze in the pasture; it has been killed, cooked, and dumped in troughs for consumption at the **Sveden Haus** that is our **Global Monoculturetm**. The best you can hope to do is arrange your food in interesting patterns and combinations on your tray. Irony upon irony, despair upon despair! And yet, you still play rock and roll?

In the first draft of this, I proved that rock has lost its power to rip the system and we should all find new musics to play. But I trashed it because I know you'll just keep on playing. Just like I will. Perhaps because we are dummies. Or could it be that rock still has something to say? On that note, I have found for you three pathways to putting some trouble back in rock and roll, three caves which haven't been explored in much depth. So use them.

1)**Play outdoors**. Here is a big problem in Ann Arbor rock: unless you play basements or the greatest club in the world, **the Halfway Inn**, your hireability rests on your power to sell beer or coffee, or to make sorority girls dance. Beer music, like beer, is comfortable, non-threatening, and mind-numbing. It says, "Why don't you wear your flannel shirt, white baseball cap, and braided belt tonight?" not, "Why don't you wrap yourself in bubble-wrap and ask cute people to pop you?". Selling coffee means acoustic guitars. 'Nuff said. And as far as making sorority girls dance, DJ's can play original recordings better than you can play covers (Note—for you band outsiders that don't know how the system works, no fraternity cares if you make the guys dance. If the girls aren't dancing, the guys aren't scoring. And you're not playing ever again). Clearly, the constraints of serving the needs of beverage sellers and oversexed fraternity brothers make it very difficult to push the musical envelope. Yes, you can slip a little poison in the drink here and there, which can be a lot of fun. But rock and roll isn't exactly the music for subtlety, nor are drunk people the greatest receptors of it.

In order to beat the system, I recommend playing street corners, the arb, roof tops...any public space you can find with lots of passers-by. The immortal **Gunrack** played a show at the abandoned gas station across from the Fleetwood. That=them punk. One of the best gigs I ever played was on top of a certain University parking structure with no security cameras and free electrical power. We printed up invitations and had a great time. True, you can't play full volume if you want to get away with public performance. But you have far more options than the mere drum circle or acoustic guitar and bongos combinations you usually see. For instance, full bands can find funny acoustic or battery-powered versions of their electric instruments. Keyboard players can go nuts at Toys 'R' Us with all the funny toy pianos and organs. In truth, you could outfit your entire band with toy instruments for very little money (I guarantee people would throw quarters)! Not into gimmicks? Buy portable generators. I saw in **Musician** one very nice model the size of a tackle box which could power a guitar player for two hours at a time for less than \$200. Bingo, your bass player can join you! Your vocalist can sing through a microphone! The possibilities are endless. And drummers, if you can't come up with a small set you can carry in one trip to any location in town, then...well, I'm sad. I recommend

bongos, a tambourine, a plastic garbage can, chicken shakes, and a splash cymbal and stand. This combination gives you nice sound options, and the whole package fits in the garbage can. But you can manage a full set with a little creativity. I've played a stand-up kit built on to one stand with a floor tom for a bass drum, a piccolo snare, clip-on hi hats, a splash, and a tom tom before. And there's nothing wrong with just stripping down to one hand drum. Bingo! No artistic constraints, big crowds from all walks of life, money if you leave a case open, and the thrill of breaking an unjust law. Oh, yeah, did I forget to mention that playing outdoors is technically illegal, and that there is a document called **The Diag Policy** out to get you? On that note, make sure you can pick up your equipment in a hurry. If an officer or a store owner asks you to leave, be courteous, pack up, and find a better place to play. You'll only get arrested if you put up a fight. And if you play quietly enough, nobody will bother you at all. Nobody ever tells the acoustic guitar players to beat it.

2)**Women, take over rock**. Yeah, I know I might just be latching on to a trend that is already happening, but dang it, it needs to! People still see all-girl bands as novelty acts. Props to my friend Chrissy, who had the ovaries to start playing drums at age twenty-one. She's so cool. She bought two dirt cheap drumsets, put the snare way off to the side so she'd never hit it, put pots and pans all around it, and just had a blast doing these chant-like beats. I think guys get into these competitions...your average guy starting drums for the first time in his twenties would try to learn to play "the right way" so that one day he could be more right than the next guy. Women bring something different to the music. I don't know what it is. I don't know what it is because rock and roll has been overwhelmingly male. Men have said all they are going to say. I'd like to see the whole framework become female over the next twenty years or so. I'd like it if the male rock and roll imagination becomes female, if a guy trying to play the music naturally "plays like a girl", just as many people would say that, say, **Suzi Quattro** "plays like a guy". So women, take over rock-and-roll. Do with it whatever you wish. Make it worthwhile again. While you're at it, take over government and industry, too.

I know a lot of you rock and rollers out there are men. But you can still help. If your band is all male, kick some of the guys out and replace them with women. Then renounce control and give it to the women. Apologize that the power was yours to renounce in the first place. All you bass players and drummers who get kicked out, make signs that say, "subservient, unworthy male rhythms section seeks empowered wymyn to revitalize our band with sounds worth hearing". Maybe you aren't a musician, but you plan on having kids someday. Sign your girls up for drum or electric guitar lessons if they ask for them. End gender specificity in musical instrument selection.

3)**Devote yourself to your audience**. I have noticed one very interesting thing about rock and roll these days, a thing that nobody talks about: Every band gets at least ten loyal fans. So many bands make music these days, nobody can keep up. Very few bands make it big. Most bands sound like other bands which sound like other bands which sounded like other bands. Twentieth century music pop music has decided to fold in and over itself rather than break open the millenium door. But you get ten fans.

To paraphrase **David Bowie's** paraphrasing of what one of his computer-industry friends said, as people become more and more lost in technology and the information age, they will want to go home and just touch a piece of wood. And that is what most of us rock and rollers are nowadays—wood. We are something organic and comfortable for people to come home to. Sure, in saying "be a source of comfort to your fans", I've contradicted ideas from point number one. But face it, most of us play craft, not art. We naturally gravitate to rigid standards of what rock and roll should be, and gladly work within those confines. We don't even need somebody to force us to play "beer-selling music", because the standards we work within already sell beer. The progressive idea here is that that music doesn't have to be about beer selling or personal glory or success, but about concern for the audience. Very few bands will make it famous in the future, but every band will have at least ten close friends who support them, who don't care about envelope pushing, just about supporting their friends. These are the people to work for. Treat them well. If you want to push the envelope artistically, push it for them. Play the messages they need to hear. Let's stop exploring egotism in rock and roll and develop selflessness. I mentioned the ideas of postmodern dread and the Death of Art earlier. In my eyes, the great artists of today ignore this supposed crisis of people's having run out of ideas and just worry about helping their communities. I think the real crisis is that critics have run out of criticism. Artists, as Marshall McLuhan says, express what it means to live in the present day. And the present day produces a lot of hurt people. The best contemporary art, be it **Tyree Banks' Heidelberg Project** or **Krzysztof Wodiczko's Alien Staff**, works to heal the victims of the age of information. So get to it, starting with those ten fans.

Oh, rock and rollers...I hope you add to my list of gateways to innovation in rock. And I hope you'll put these ideas and/or your ideas into practice. I hope you will do so in Ann Arbor. And I hope I can be in your audience when you do so I can sing your praises in this column.

Love,

Famous Willy

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