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*The Death of Rock'n'Roll*



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Book Review by Christopher Caldwell

## IT'S ONLY ROCK AND ROLL

*Like a Rolling Stone: A Memoir*, by Jann S. Wenner.  
Little, Brown and Company, 592 pages \$35



**T**HE FIRST ROCK-AND-ROLL HALL OF Fame induction ceremony, held in 1986, was a black-tie event at New York's Waldorf Astoria. It honored rock's early greats, dead and alive: Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and others. Jann Wenner, the founder of *Rolling Stone* magazine, was already serving on the Hall's selection committee. He describes those inducted in his recent autobiography, *Like a Rolling Stone*, as "young men who had together ridden an outlaw circuit—chased and shut down by segregationists, cops, politicians, parents, and preachers." This identity is important for Wenner, who insisted from the outset that his magazine would be "not just about the music, but also about the attitudes that the music embraces." Wenner did a booming business catering to this "outlaw" worldview, long after he had become a corporate mogul with a line to the White House and a private jet. Rock contains the contradictions of the Baby Boom generation. It is the communal expression of an individualist age. It is in some ways a magical synthesis and in others a pious fraud.

How rock-and-roll "attitudes" relate to rock itself should be growing clearer. For, contrary

to Danny & the Juniors, rock and roll turned out not to be here to stay. It is not dead, exactly: It still makes up almost 20% of the music that people download. But it lags far behind hip-hop, and old-timers are its customers. On any given day, music from the 20th century accounts for roughly half of the top hundred rock songs on Apple's iTunes. Queen, Aerosmith, and Fleetwood Mac are forever young there.

**B**UT THE SOCIAL MILIEU IN WHICH their songs sprouted is not. What at the time seemed like robust modern ideas about drugs and sex were in large part accidental prerogatives, conferred on the Baby Boom by its demographic might. In his autobiography, Wenner writes of managing his youthful "ambition and rebelliousness." Youth brings those two things out in everybody. But they tend to be at odds. Elders capable of rewarding ambition do not look kindly on rebellion, and they outnumber the young. Today, for instance, only 31% of the population is under 24. Normally, adolescent rebellions end in a mix of emancipation and humiliation.

It was different for the Baby Boomers. Wenner, born at the very prow of the post-

war Boom, turned 24 in 1970, when 46% of the country was his age or younger—an army of potential youth rebels large enough to tip the intergenerational balance. The more stridently youth put forward its demands, the more desperately grown-ups pled for "with-it" interlocutors. So for the early Baby Boomers, the ones born in the first decade after the war and today recently retired, adolescence had a different meaning than it has had for any American generation before or since. For them it was not a time of illusions, exclusions, and sputtering impotence. It was a time of camaraderie and effective conflict resolution that offered a set of best practices to last a lifetime. That is the story of Wenner, *Rolling Stone*, the 1970s, and the age of rock and roll more generally.

**W**ENNER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY READS like a response to Joe Hagan's *Sticky Fingers*, a better-written, more thorough, and more trustworthy life of Wenner published in 2017. Wenner grew up in California to parents who were striking it rich. They started a successful baby formula company before divorcing. His mother



moved away to Hawaii when Wenner was in his early teens, telling him, "You're on your own, Buster Brown." It was a privileged kind of dysfunction. His father kept a ski house in the Rockies. His relatives lived on Park Avenue. Wenner was shipped to a Southern California prep school, carrying a terrible emotional imbalance: He was way oversupplied with self-importance and way undersupplied with love. He was sexually conflicted. He loved politics. He arrived at Berkeley in time for the Free Speech Movement—a brief outburst at which a bunch of earnest kids sang "We Shall Overcome" to protest the rules for the campus extracurricular-activities sign-up tables, implicitly comparing their provincial spat to what turned out to be the climactic struggles of the civil rights movement. Its standing as a significant historical event is unlikely to outlive the Baby Boom radicals who carried it out.

**W**HAT WENNER LOVED MOST OF ALL was rock and roll, not just as an art form but as a way of life, almost a hobby—the concerts, the drugs, the drug paraphernalia, and the sex, or at least the promise thereof. In 1967, at age 21, with \$7,500, most of it borrowed from the family of the woman he would marry, he started *Rolling Stone*. "I have the devil in me," he told her. "It's not a good idea for you to be around me, but I love you and want to be with you." It was a preemptive self-exoneration, but he wasn't making anything up. In the 1990s he would leave her, after 25 years of marriage, for a young man who worked for Calvin Klein. Hagan, whose book is more trustworthy on the subject of Wenner's appetites, compares him to the gluttonous Augustus Gloop from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

The early *Rolling Stone* didn't look like much. Its coverage tilted toward pot raids on rock stars, the Grateful Dead's apartment in Haight-Ashbury, and updates about Bob Dylan's Nashville recording sessions. It was news when Janis Joplin drew as many as 2,000 people to a beachside concert in Marin County. Those scattered drifters didn't look like much of a market for anything. But Wenner was onto something. A year and a half later, half a million young people would show up at Woodstock. To paraphrase something Country Joe and the Fish sang at the time, there was plenty of good money to be made supplying the hippies with the tools of the trade, and *Rolling Stone* had the market cornered. Wenner was still in his early twenties. No one so young would control such an important American institution until Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook in the following century.

For about 25 years after the mid-1980s—when the youngest of the Baby Boomers had entered the job market and the oldest were at the height of their earning power—Wenner controlled a multi-title publishing empire, valued at one point in the hundreds of millions of dollars. He had the best portrait photographers: Annie Leibovitz and Richard Avedon. He had celebrated writers, including Tom Wolfe and P.J. O'Rourke. But he had wildly overrated ones, too, like Hunter S. Thompson. The so-called "gonzo" journalism that Thompson invented and embodied was a sort of automatic writing about American politics done under the influence of hallucinogens. Thompson spent the 1980s and '90s immured in addiction and writer's block and committed suicide in 2005. He required considerable editing even in his prime, but Wenner considered it worth the effort if the end result was sentences like this one: "Palm Beach was becoming a place where price tags mean nothing, and the rich are always in heat, where pampered animals are openly worshipped in church and naked millionaires gnaw the brassieres off the chests of their own daughters in public." "I found it impossible not to laugh out loud when I read his stuff," Wenner writes. Posterity may differ.

**W**ENNER STARTED WITH LITTLE SELF-knowledge, and the evidence of his autobiography is that he never acquired much. He was a businessman of tremendous creativity, someone who was really good at what Joni Mitchell referred to as "stoking the star-maker machinery / Behind the popular song." That wasn't quite enough for him. There was a magic about the entertainers he promoted—and, later, about politicians. He longed to get close to them and befriend them. All of them. He was on a first-name basis with the celebrities of his time, from "Mick" to "Bruce." He knew people on Saturday Night Live—comedians "Danny" Ackroyd and "Billy" Murray. (In these pages, rapper Ice-T becomes, through a modest vocative truncation, "Ice.") The songwriter Jimmy Webb was a "long-lost brother." So was the singer Bono. Coincidentally, all of Wenner's long-lost brothers turned out to be rich and famous. Insufficiently famous people retain their surnames, as in this passage about the year 2000: "The cover of Al came out, timed to be on newsstands for the two weeks leading to Election Day. Seliger had shot him in a desert background, thumbs hooked in his pockets, khakis, a black tee under his denim work shirt." "Seliger" is the photographer Mark Seliger, Wenner's colleague for decades,

who shot 188 *Rolling Stone* covers for him. "Al" is Vice President Al Gore.

**W**ENNER'S OWN POLITICS ARE RHE-torically extremist and operationally conventional. He's a *reductio ad Hitlerum* man. "The Nixon convention was as slick as anything Goebbels ever staged," is his recollection of the 1972 presidential campaign. And yet the main strand of hippie politics from the 1960s and '70s—its passion for simplicity, unpretentiousness, community, and sharing—made no impression on him. Today in almost every American elementary school you can hear second-graders singing Bob Marley's beautiful "Three Little Birds" or George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun," to the delight not just of leftists but also of apolitical, spiritual, and even traditional people. That wasn't Wenner's bag. He loved sex and drugs and rock and roll, but he did not love the end to which sex and drugs and rock and roll was supposed to be the means.

His end was luxury. Mick Jagger gave him caviar spoons as a present. His drug of choice was cocaine. He bought two private jets—a Gulfstream II and then a IV. And about such matters he was no more prone to self-examination than he was about anything else. At the top of one page he boasts of attending a Russian oligarch's cross-dressing party on a nine-story yacht, and then at the bottom of the page lays into George W. Bush for his "greed." Elsewhere he writes: "Bush and his oil-well buddies were guilty of gang-raping the planet is the plainest way of saying it." How the president's cronies carried out this rape is left unspecified—maybe by flying around on private planes or something.

There is a lot of hedonism in this book, but if there is one pleasure that could be said to thrill Wenner above all others, it's *hierarchy* and outward signs of being on the winner's side of it. On multiple occasions he writes with rapture about being in motorcades—traveling to the airport with Vice President Gore, for example, on "a bulletproof, zero-traffic ride on deserted streets and empty freeways, ramps blocked until we passed." He doesn't sound guilty, he sounds liberated. There is one he rides in with Bruce Springsteen:

The police who escorted our car back to the airport had cleared the streets. Fans were lined up for a few blocks behind barricades. Bruce said, "Watch, I'm going to Pope it." He rolled down the window, stuck his head and arm out, and waved his hand to the crowd from the wrist down, like he was John XXIII. It was done with the utmost sincerity.



When Wenner and Atlantic Records boss Ahmet Ertegun took I.M. Pei, the architect of the Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame, to Elvis Presley's Graceland to give him an idea of rock culture, Wenner reports that "Ahmet's Louis Vuitton suitcase, custom made for eight pairs of shoes, got lost, and a limo driver had to wait for it at the airport all night." (No, he didn't have to—he was made to.) At one point Wenner actually upbraided Vice President Gore for having left him waiting in a kindergarten room while Gore did a school event.

**A**S THE YEARS PASSED, WENNER CAME to control powerful assets. His magazine could glamorize performers and songs in a way that made certain musicians grovel before him. And that, in turn, led certain Democratic Party politicians, ever hungry for New York and Hollywood dollars, to seek him out as an arranger of benefit concerts. Wenner is an undeviating partisan. *Rolling Stone* in 1976, he says, was "virtually an official part of the Carter campaign, and they treated us as such." In the 1990s he was defending Bill Clinton against his own writers: "I wasn't going to enable stupid denigration by his enemies—on the right or the left." And by 2004, the Federal Elections Commission ac-

tually did consider his association with John Kerry's presidential campaign an official one because of the fundraising concerts he had produced, featuring Crosby, Stills & Nash, the Eagles, and Paul Simon. These he did in tandem with two other multimillionaire Democrats—John Sykes of Infinity Radio and Harvey Weinstein of Miramax. Wenner today refers to the latter as "the bully Harvey Weinstein," although just before his public misfortunes in late 2017, Weinstein was preparing an offer to buy *Rolling Stone* from him. The party's dependence on Wenner, Weinstein, and other entertainment moguls was weakened, though not broken, by the arrival of Barack Obama in 2008. "I didn't need to recruit artists," Wenner writes, "as everyone was already on board."

There was a sense by then of something coming to an end. "Clinton and Gore are men who came of age in the sixties," Wenner had optimistically told his readers in the 1990s, "and whose sensibilities and value systems were formed then." Really, the Baby Boom was his party. Neither rock and roll nor rock-and-roll journalism was likely to survive the end of that generation's influence.

It is easy to exaggerate the merits of this rock-and-roll writing, all of it produced and consumed in the flush of youthful enthusi-

asm, overloaded with encomia and superlatives. "Don Henley's beautiful and frightening song 'Life in the Fast Lane,'" Wenner enthuses, "was the classic that enshrined this era definitively." *That* song? Beautiful? Enshrined? It was a song that seemed to be about cocaine and it came out when Wenner was doing a lot of cocaine. Wenner's best critics wrote this way: "They were rocking harder than I have ever heard them rock before," wrote Bob Palmer about the Stones. Everything had to be the epitome of something. "Elvis was as big as the whole country itself, as big as the whole dream," Bruce Springsteen wrote in a special issue. "He embodied the essence of it." It's all fine for what it is, but what it is is promotional writing, halfway between a small-town Memorial Day oration and a light beer commercial.

**A**T A CERTAIN POINT WENNER SEEMS to have realized that his magazine's real constituency was the rock-and-roll industry, not the rock-and-roll fan base or anything as ethereal as the rock-and-roll sensibility. That is what allowed *Rolling Stone* to outlast almost all of the used record stores, live-music coffee houses, head shops, and mimeographed fanzines launched by less hard-headed rock-and-rollers. *Rolling Stone*

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was the trade publication of a very powerful industry in its heyday.

But by 2017, when Wenner Media sold its ownership stake, bankers were closing in. Very much like Charlie Croker in Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full* (1998), Wenner had to surrender the regalia of corporate power—his beloved plane above all. He had laid off top editors, including one who had been working with him since the Carter Administration. The magazine had become downright disreputable. In November 2014, it published an account of a gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity that turned out to have been fabricated. In his autobiography, Wenner faults the fraternity his magazine baselessly accused: "Both our sympathy for her, and the premeditated stonewalling by the fraternity and the UVA administration (who refused to provide us with crucial information) clouded our decisions and judgments."

As an executive, though, Wenner retained all his analytical acuity. He lamented the way Facebook, Apple, and Google had come to dominate media. His complaint was an exercise in blame-shifting. But it was not wrong:

They appropriated for themselves the intellectual property created by magazines and newspapers, repackaged it, gave it away free to our customers, and

sold ads to our advertisers. They tricked publishers into thinking they were building traffic for their own websites. That was a lie, and one day the dragons walked away, leaving their victims in the news and journalism business to bleed out.

**I**N HIS DAY, WENNER HAD BEEN JUST SUCH a "dragon" of the magazine industry—a TV-style producer in a world of print editors, at a time when TV-style "celebrity" was getting the upper hand on literary-style "fame." Wenner decided to run a feature on the erudite and tormented philosophical novelist David Foster Wallace because "I liked the long-haired, headband-wearing photo of him in the book review section. He looked totally *Rolling Stone*." He put Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the Boston marathon terrorist, on the magazine's cover for similar reasons. "I had been intrigued with a photo of the 19-year-old on the front page of the *New York Times*, dark moody eyes and a mass of curly hair like Jim Morrison, an early Bob Dylan, or thousands of other college students." He was, as they say, hot.

This attitude toward celebrity may sound corrupt. It is, but only in the way the wider culture business is. To most ordinary people, celebrity is a secondary, derivative thing: a re-

flection, whether accurate or blurred, of some kind of charisma. To a promoter it is something more: Celebrity is primary. It is the charisma itself, an aura certain people radiate, independent of what they do.

And yet it is also the product, to be bartered like any other. So the need arises for someone at the heart of the creative process who *doesn't* revere it. Rich Cohen, a journalist and former *Rolling Stone* writer, once wrote that Wenner's success rested on two strengths: "First, he understood that rock and roll was a culture as much as an art form.... Second, he understood, deep down, that this culture—peace and love and the rest—was a business." The role of businessmen in creative industries is both indispensable and contemptible. They can love art sincerely, but at some level they must be dead to its magic. As a bartender can succeed at his work only if he is indifferent to alcohol's allure, Wenner, the impresario, the name-dropper, the stoker of the star-maker machinery, owes his eminence in the Age of Rock and Roll to his having been, in some deep and unchangeable way, a philistine.

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