

## Assaultive Rock Songs

Assaulting the audience with a barrage of very loud distorted sound and violent lyrics is part of the rock tradition. The real target of the assault, of course, is not the audience itself, but the musicians' and audience's "other": those aspects of reality – whether this means the older generation, the political establishment, rival youth cultures, or a lover/enemy – whose negative influence is deemed to be irreconcilable with the attainment of selfhood. The electric guitar itself, with its potential for a lacerating, buzz-saw sonic attack, can be a phallic weapon wielded against those who would squelch the individual's aggressive, defiant gestures towards absolute freedom and dominance.

The history of rock has seen waves of assaultive sound-types crash against and wear away the shore of the musically acceptable, each wave seemingly more violent, more absolutely noise-like than the last: the electric guitar sonorities of black musicians like Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters in the 1950s, the fuzz-tone menace of mid-1960s songs like the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction", the bass-heavy, cavernous, ear-splitting heavy metal sound pioneered by Led Zeppelin in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the vengefully, violently, deliberately anti-musical cacophony of late-1970s punk.

Eno's adoption of the assaultive sound-ideal was not an unpremeditated, instinctive act, as it has been for so many rock musicians. Even early in his career he was making music about music: his pieces are part of a process of distancing, they are once removed from the unreflected level of everyday rock realities and myths. He has never espoused violence except at the artistic level, and it is just at this level that the images and textures of his assaultive songs play themselves out.

The lyrics of the assaultive Eno song tend to be macabre and disturbing, evoking a generalized malaise not directed at anything in particular, and thus lacking the confrontational, us-against-them dialectic of much assaultive rock. "The Paw Paw Negro Blowtorch" (*Warm Jets*), in Eno's words, "celebrates the possibility of a love affair" with a man "who emerged from the forests around Paw Paw, Michigan with a strange ailment – his breath caused things to ignite."<sup>1</sup> "Baby's On Fire" (*Warm Jets*) is a bizarre fantasy about a photography session involving a burning infant and unthinking, laughing onlookers – possibly referring to the napalm tragedies of the Vietnam War. "Blank Frank"'s (*Warm Jets*) hero, in the words of the song, "is the messenger of your doom and your destruction [like Dylan's "Wicked Messenger" on *John Wesley Harding*?] ... His particular skill is leaving bombs in people's driveways." Birds of prey, headless chickens, zombies, dead finks, opium farmers, suicidal Chinamen, deadly black waters, fallen meteors, dark alleys, guns, weapons, satellites, black stars, and burning fingers, toes, airlines, uncles, books, and shoes: such evil images restlessly prowled through Eno's assaultive rock songs, often disconnected from any logical or comprehensible sequence of events, shadowing the barely controlled logic of the musical presentation.

*Here Come the Warm Jets* opens Eno's solo career with a sonic assault, though the lyrics to "Needles in the Camel's Eye," if ambiguous and vague, evoke a spiritual quest with overtones both Christian and Taoist (Eno's "All mysteries are just more needles in the camel's eye" de-

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Eno and Russell Mills, *More Dark than Shark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 16.