Soft Rock

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Genres: North America

Side of Abbey Road (1969) and Jimmy Smith's Christmas Cookin' (1964). In the 1970s, however, several artists released albums whose enormous commercial success paved the way for the rapid rise of smooth jazz in the 1980s. Of those albums, George Benson's Breezin' (1976) and trumpeter Chuck Mangione's Feels So Good (1977) stand out. Breezin' became the number one selling album for both the jazz and pop charts in 1976. Feels So Good nearly duplicated that feat for 1977, topping the jazz album charts and reaching number two in the pop charts. In addition to these smooth jazz pioneers, other artists who stand out in the genre include Spyro Gyra, The Crusaders, Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour, Bob James, Groover Washington, Jr., The Yellowjackets, Chris Botti, Dave Koz and David Sanborn.

In the 1980s smooth jazz quickly gained popularity, as reflected not only by record sales but also significantly by the prevalence of the style on FM radio. By the late 1980s several prominent radio stations in the US had switched their previous traditional jazz or classic rock formats to a new format known as Adult Contemporary, sometimes also referred to as Quiet Storm or The Wave (derived from the call letters of one of the first full-time smooth jazz stations, KTWV in Southern California). The sound of Adult Contemporary radio was centered around smooth jazz, augmented by rock and R&B artists such as Sting and Sade who combined pop vocals with the comfortable instrumental sounds of smooth jazz. The growth of the Adult Contemporary radio format, combined with a continued decline in traditional jazz radio programming, led many listeners to identify it as the sound of jazz itself. This development provided fuel to the 'neo-conservative' jazz movement, also launched in the 1980s, that sought to restore to jazz its more 'traditional' musical values of swing rhythms, harmonic complexity and studied virtuosity. Many of those critics understood smooth jazz as a derivative of jazz-rock and fusion, and so those styles also came under increasing attack. However, whereas early jazz-rock tended to emphasize virtuosity, complexity, and the search for new avenues of musical expressions, smooth jazz tended to play it safe, emphasizing comfort and predictability rather than exploration. The lumping together of jazz-rock and smooth jazz is thus often a misleading comparison.

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Soft Rock
The term 'soft rock' refers to a style of melodic vocal music with romantic themes and lush production primarily associated with rock era singers of the so-called 'baby boomer' generation. Baby-boomers were born during a post-World War II transition in the United States (1945–60), during which marriage and parenthood occurred at lower ages, fertility increased and the birthrate doubled (Coonz 2000). Baby-boomers born during the mid-to-late 1940s were among rock 'n roll's first audiences, and in adulthood they translated aspects of the genre into their own hybrids, including singer-songwriter pop, country rock and soft soul. These genres have all shaped soft rock's stylistic repertoire. Critics have routinely dismissed soft rock as sentimental and formulaic but it is one of the most complex and elusive of musical genres.

Defining the Indefinable
Radio programming trends are integral to understanding soft rock's initial commercial circulation and its endurance. Whereas rock and R&B are often socially coded by race, soft rock is among popular music's most socially and aurally diverse genres, as it lacks a dominant instrument or pure stylistic core and instead relies on radio's periodic reformulation of the genre's sound in concert with commercial trends in recording and production.

The radio format known since 1979 as 'Adult Contemporary' (AC) began in the 1960s as easy listening 'middle of the road (MOR) radio and aimed for an older audience alienated by rock (Hyatt 1999). The format initially focused on ageing vocal crooners, such as Tony Bennett, whose mainstream pop airplay was declining, and plush instrumental music, such as that of Henry Mancini. In the 1970s the format shifted primarily toward vocal music and heavily integrated younger acts, especially singer-songwriters, MOR acts that fused rock instrumentation with vocal crooning, country rock and lush R&B artists. This programming transition solidified softer musical iterations.
of traditional genres like folk, country and R&B as belonging to a discernible 'soft rock' sound, epitomized by such performers as Bread, the Carpenters, Roberta Flack, Anne Murray and James Taylor. Easy listening/MOR radio redefined itself to AC in order to target younger acts and open up its aural template to dance-pop and rock crossovers. For example, acts not usually associated with AC such as Foreigner and Hall & Oates made appearances on its charts with keyboard-laden 'power ballads' such as 'Waiting for a Girl Like You' (1981) and sleek pop-soul ballads such as 'One on One' (1983) respectively. By association, these kinds of songs reshaped soft rock's sound, a modernizing trend that continued into the 1990s and 2000s.

By the early 2000s MOR/easy listening stations were mainly playing instrumental music, whereas the radio industry defined AC as recent, popular vocal songs combined with oldies that tend to be upbeat and soft. The stations themselves primarily targeted the 25- to 54-year-old female demographic, aired news and talk segments during commuting hours and self-advertised as ideal office accompaniment (Bucenic 2007). AC's adult audience appeal made it a lucrative format for advertisers and a consistent outlet for exposing softer contemporary music. The 1985 debut of Video Hits One (VH1) as an adult alternative video channel signified the market's value.

Few artists can be categorized exclusively as 'soft rock' in terms of sound, radio exposure and audience, though Air Supply, the Fifth Dimension and Engelbert Humperdinck are among those who consistently achieved their biggest hits on adult radio. Despite the lack of a clear prototype there are three dominant arrangement styles. Guitar-centered arrangements with a folk flavor are integral to performers such as Bread, John Denver, Dan Fogelberg, Seals & Croft and Taylor. This approach has given artists such as Denver mobility between country and pop formats and imbued others with folk credibility. Meanwhile, the Captain & Tennille, the Carpenters, Flack, Elton John and Carole King are synonymous with piano-oriented songs. Elsewhere, lush orchestral arrangements with swelling choruses define some of the biggest soft rock hits of Barry Manilow and Diana Ross. The gradual integration of synthesizer technology into 1970s mainstream pop is evident in the way soft rock songs fuse electronic textures - keyboards, drum machines and programmed orchestral effects - with more traditional acoustic instruments. More commonly, singers of various genre orientations have crafted songs that adhere to the genre blueprint radio stations and video channels perpetuate.

Lyrically, soft rock songs typically feature populist lyrics centered on broad topics like love, friendship and community. They also tend to borrow aural textures from diverse genres, imbuing the music with a scavenger-like character that transcends cultural barriers. For example, the Carpenters' 1970 single '(They Long to Be) Close to You' employed a choral background vocal style derived from 1950s pop, while 'Top of the World' (1973) featured a pedal steel, an instrument more common in country music.

**Soft Rock: Generational Betrayal?**

The genre's amorphousness contributes to critical skepticism that its accessibility is an artistic liability. Rock 'n' roll was a radical new youth-oriented musical style and culture with a stronger focus on danceable rhythms than melody and lyrical themes pertaining to adolescent dating, driving and school. It was also distinguished from pre-rock pop by the prominence of singers who performed original compositions and played instruments, and its synthesis of R&B, country music and blues.

Rock's role as a generational marker of a contemporary sensibility was seemingly threatened by softer variants interpreted to represent the professionalism, sentimentality and lightness of pre-rock pop. Yet rock never completely broke away from the intimate microphone style of crooning forged in the 1920s by Russ Columbo and Bing Crosby. Crooning influenced rock and persisted among some of its key performers. For example, it is well known that Italian-American pop crooners significantly influenced Elvis Presley (Miller 1999).

Crooning's influence on rock 'n' roll, its commercial extension through 'rock era crooners' (RECs) and the proliferation of baby-boomer 'standards' albums define soft rock as a natural outgrowth of the crooning tradition (Stephens 2008). Intimate singing persisted during rock 'n' roll's emergence through teen pop singers such as Paul Anka and Connie Francis, and more precocious crooners such as Bobby Darin. The British Invasion, the mid-1960s folk revival and late 1960s sub-genres such as 'art rock' furthered rock's maturation from music for dancing toward music for listening (Palmer 1995).

Soft rock's most immediate vocal predecessors include a generation of rock era crooners such as Jack Jones, Johnny Mathis and Barbra Streisand, who began recording between the mid-to-late 1950s and the early 1960s. In their refinement they were like pre-rock crooners but in downplaying the influence of jazz they made themselves more accessible to pop audiences. RECs were popular 1960s album-sellers.
and scored their most significant radio successes on the easy listening charts. Some RECs scored hit singles exclusively on the easy listening format (Stephens 2008). As baby-boomers matured in the late 1960s and early 1970s they continued to expand the music's scope and drew from a wealth of sources, including RECs. Several baby-boomers revitalized their careers with ‘standards’ albums comprised of modern interpretations of pre-rock popular songs including Linda Ronstadt’s What’s New (1983), Natalie Cole’s Unforgettable with Love (1991) and Rod Stewart’s It Had to Be You ... The Great American Songbook (2002).

In soft rock the baby boomer generation of musicians reached musical and lyrical maturity. In musical terms, some of mainstream rock’s seminal albums began to employ a textual sophistication removed from its initial sound that influenced soft rock’s development. The production techniques, intricate arrangements and clever wordplay on albums such as the Beatles’ Rubber Soul and Revolver (featuring the soft rock classics ‘Norwegian Wood,’ ‘Michelle,’ ‘In My Life’ and ‘Here There and Everywhere’) refined the genre beyond its mid-1960s origins. The prevalence of complex arrangements and lush background vocals in soft rock derives from the production experiments mainstream rockers and their producers forged in the mid-to-late 1960s.

Thematically, as boomers aged into their twenties and thirties they crafted social anthems and love songs in language reflective of their political and personal concerns. Joni Mitchell’s ‘Both Sides Now’ and Carly Simon’s ‘That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be’ exhibited a new-found psychological ennu and introspection toward romance, social conformity (Janis Ian’s At Seventeen) and political discontent (Jackson Browne’s ‘The Pretender’) in their songs. Soft rockers were also frequently involved in activist politics. Browne, Simon, Bonnie Raitt and James Taylor were among the performers at 1979’s ‘No Nukes: MUSE Concerts for a Non-Nuclear Future’ (also a popular concert album) and soft rock boomers dominated the USA for Africa and Artists United Against Apartheid recordings.

Radio Mellows

Although easy listening/MOR stations featured some baby-boomer acts during the 1960s, such as The Association and The Fifth Dimension, the 1970s marked the acme of soft rock’s achievement in overlapping with mainstream pop. In 1965, the height of the British Invasion, folk rock and Motown, there had been no overlapping number one singles on Billboard’s Hot 100 singles listing and the easy listening charts. But by 1972 nine of the 21 number hits (or 43 percent) were also easy listening chart toppers (Hyatt 1999; Whiburn 2002). As mainstream rock’s tone mellowed in the early 1970s and rock diversified into subgenres like country rock, radio programming evolved into niche marketing. Singer-songwriters such as Carole King, John, Mitchell and Taylor had a dual appeal to rock’s ‘youth audience’ and adult listeners. This appeal also applied to country rock acts such as The Eagles and Ronstadt, soft soul acts such as Plack and The Stylistics and eclectic interpreters such as Bette Midler and Maria Muldaur. Soft rock-associated acts such as Bread, Denver, Olivia Newton-John and Ross had footholds in mainstream Top 40 radio and the easy listening charts, which pushed the genre beyond its association with older crooners.

The Adult Contemporary Era and Beyond

Easy listening radio’s 1979 rechristening as ‘Adult Contemporary’ reflected the prominence of baby-boomer musicians in the format and attracted younger artists in the 1980s. Rock acts, including album-oriented rock (AOR) groups such as Fleetwood Mac, Journey, REO Speedwagon and Toto, became more prominent in the 1980s as AC radio welcomed ‘power ballads’ — romantic ballads featuring prominent guitar and keyboard solos. Media consolidation and the resulting cross-promotional strategies between film and popular music also reinvigorated the format in the 1980s to 1990s. Bryan Adams, Phil Collins, Celine Dion, Kenny Loggins and Madonna scored some of the format’s biggest hits with film themes. The age range of soft rock musicians also diversified, thanks to the mid-1990s birth of the ‘adult alternative’ format featuring younger adult acts such as Sheryl Crow, Jewel, the Dave Matthews Band and John Mayer. Similarly, in the 2000s a new generation of younger crooners, such as Michael Bublé and Norah Jones, scored its biggest radio hits on adult-oriented formats. Production trends and radio programming trends have continued to inform each other and refine the notion of soft rock and adult music.

In the 2000s soft rock garnered renewed critical attention parallel to the mid-1990s swing and lounge revival. Hip-O Records and Time-Life Music released soft rock-themed compilations that repackage prominent soft rock singles and present them as a cohesive genre. Similarly in June 2007 VH1 capitalized on
the genre's cachet when it aired the two-hour special 40 Most Softsational Soft-Rock Songs. In the early twenty-first century soft rock remained a broadly defined and critically contested genre but its disruption of clear-cut distinctions between pre-rock pop and rock was notable as it was more of a variant than a dilution of rock's range. It was particularly illuminative of how gaps between youth and adult music had declined as soft rock artists fused stylistic elements from both taste cultures. The ongoing ability of soft rock songs to cross boundaries and the industry's continual refinements to the genre's boundaries indicate its core status among rock's subgenres and continued relevance.

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VINCENT STEPHENS

Soul
The word soul has its origins in the religious experience. The soul is that ineffable part of a human being that many understand as their core or essence. It is the soul that many people believe survives the corporeal part of one's body - the flesh, blood, bones, organs and brain - and that ascends to heaven upon one's death. Just as the soul is understood to represent the essence of a given individual, soul music was understood implicitly by some, explicitly by others, to represent in some sense the very essence of black culture.

The term was first used with regard to music to refer to a style of jazz that was an offshoot of hard bop current in the 1950s. Sometimes designated 'soul jazz,' a few of the style's primary exponents were Horace Silver, Bobby Timmons and Lee Morgan. The recordings of these musicians, in many senses, can be understood as responding to the increasing complexities of the bebop style originated by musicians such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in the early and mid-1940s by returning to the musical roots of black culture. Consequently, soul jazz drew extensively on techniques, gestures and, at times, the repertoire of blues and gospel.

As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s the term soul began to be used colloquially to refer to aspects of African-American personality, style or culture, as in 'she's a soul sister;' 'he's got soul;' 'boy, that's soulful' and, of course, as an appellation for down home cooking, 'soul food.' In the 1960s soul music came to designate a variety of styles of rhythm and blues, demarcated by region and largely rooted in black gospel music, and which, although having antecedents in

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