

Rock in a Hard Place: Grassroots Cultural Production in the Post-Elvis Era



William T. Bielby
University of California, Santa Barbara

The emergence of rock and roll transformed the world of popular music in the mid-1950s. It inspired many teenagers to consider making music themselves, and they invented a new cultural form, the teen rock and roll band. Drawing on my research on the first generation of grassroots bands in the post-Elvis era, I describe how the social structure and status system of schools shaped this new cultural form and why it developed as a male-dominated form of cultural production. Drawing on research on cultural capital, status attainment, and deviant subcultural involvements, I develop a framework for understanding how participation in grassroots cultural production affects life-course trajectories.

*He used to carry his guitar in a gunny sack
Go sit beneath the tree by the railroad track
.....
Maybe someday your name will be in lights
Saying Johnny B. Goode tonight.*

*Lyrics by Chuck Berry, 1958,
"Johnny B. Goode"*

Joe, who, was raised in a working-class industrial suburb south of Chicago, gave the following account about his first guitar:

It was probably about my freshman year in high school [1958], that I decided to play guitar. And my parents went out, I'll never forget it. The old song, Johnny B. Goode? Used to carry his guitar in a gunny sack? I actually carried my guitar in a gunny sack. They went out to a pawnshop and bought me a white, arch-topped guitar with the f-holes. And the top was cracked, I remember that, and I said well, now I got to learn how to play this thing. And every time I learned it, I put my guitar in my sack and go over to all my friends house, and every time I learned a new song, "hey, want to hear the song I learned?"

Direct correspondence to William T. Bielby, Department of Sociology, University of California, 2834 Ellison Hall, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9430 (bielbyw@soc.ucsb.edu).

In 1958, Joe was not a professional musician. Not even close. But his story account describes his very first efforts at participating in the performance of rock and roll music. Joe's experience, participating in the making of music at the local level, in "grassroots cultural production," is rarely studied by cultural sociologists.

Of course, popular music has not escaped the attention of cultural sociologists, although rarely has scholarship on rock and roll in particular or popular music in general appeared in our discipline's mainstream journals. A search of sociology abstracts in JSTOR for the terms "rock and roll," "rock music," "music industry," and "popular music" yields just nine articles published over a span of a quarter of a century; just three since 1990. These nine articles are listed in Table 1. With only a few exceptions, this scholarship is mostly about commercially produced music and the music industry, not about grassroots performance. For example, there is the small number of important studies by Richard Peterson and others on how the industrial and organizational structure of the music industry affects the proliferation of musical

To view additional graphics and sound clips that supplement this article, please see the *ASR* Web site (<http://www.asanet.org/journals/asr/2004/toc041.html>).

Table 1. Sociology Articles Containing the Phrases “Rock and Roll,” “Rock Music,” “Music Industry,” or “Popular Music,” 1957–1999

-
1. “When Women Play the Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music.” Mary Ann Clawson, *Gender and Society* (April, 1999)
 2. “Innovation and Diversity in the Popular Music Industry, 1969 to 1990.” Paul D. Lopes. *American Sociological Review* (February, 1992)
 3. “Just Me and the Boys? Women in Local-Level Rock and Roll.” Stephen B. Groce; Margaret Cooper. *Gender and Society* (June, 1990)
 4. “Music as Social Circumstance.” Judith R. Blau. *Social Forces* (June, 1988)
 5. “The Mass Society and Group Action Theories of Cultural Production: The Case of Stylistic Innovation in Jazz.” Lars Bjorn. *Social Forces* (December, 1981)
 6. “Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music.” Richard A. Peterson; David G. Berger. *American Sociological Review* (April, 1975)
 7. “Entrepreneurship in Organizations: Evidence from the Popular Music Industry.” Richard A. Peterson; David G. Berger, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (March, 1971)
 8. “Changing Courtship Patterns in the Popular Song.” James T. Carey. *American Journal of Sociology* (May, 1969)
 9. “Youth and Popular Music: A Study in the Sociology of Taste.” John Johnstone; Elihu Katz. *American Journal of Sociology* (May, 1957)
-

Data source: JSTOR.

styles (Table 1). There is also old work found in the communication studies traditions on consumption behavior and the content of popular songs. Just two studies deal with the social organization of rock music performance at the local level, notably, both published in *Gender & Society*.

But what is sociologically interesting about grassroots cultural production? I maintain that it is sociologically significant at three levels. The first is as a status attainment process. Participation in the grassroots music scene is likely to have effects, for better or worse, on school experiences, on the transition to adulthood, and on the adult experiences of those who performed in the bands. Drawing on the work of Paul DiMaggio (1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985), experience in a teenage band can be thought of as an issue of how acquisition of lowbrow cultural capital and participation in socially devalued status cultures affect adult attainment (Hagan 1991). The second is as an issue about organizations and institutions, namely, what shapes the emergence of a new and perhaps distinctive organizational form of cultural production—in this case the teen rock and roll band. The third, which I address only briefly, is that music (including commercially produced rock music) is a cultural commodity that is consumed, appropriated, and reinterpreted in a way that provides meaning in people’s lives, includ-

ing the many individuals who participate in making rock and roll music at a grassroots level.

In this article, I draw on eighteen months of interviews and historical work done on the first generation of grassroots rock and roll performers to come out of the mostly working-class south suburbs of Chicago. I chose this site for three reasons. First, I was interested in how the mostly white teen performers did and did not relate to the music performed by and marketed to African Americans. The Chicago south suburbs is a racially mixed but extremely segregated set of communities, just a few miles from Chicago’s Black Belt, the birthplace of modern urban blues. Many of the teenagers—especially the musicians—from that part of metropolitan Chicago, who were deeply into the rock and roll scene, had their musical tastes shaped in part by the rhythm & blues and the urban blues music coming from Chicago’s African American radio stations broadcasting to the south side.

At the same time, this region is *not* known for racial tolerance, especially in the late 1950s, when these suburbs experienced explosive growth as working-class white ethnics fled Chicago’s changing neighborhoods (Tauber and Tauber 1965; Massey and Denton 1993; Rosen 1998). It is a region where most teens went either to mostly white or to mostly African American grade schools. For most of them, high school was the locus of their first sub-

stantive social interaction with age peers of a different race. And even then, in the high schools, interracial interaction was minimal during classroom hours. Thus, popular music may have provided an opportunity for black-white interaction among those engaged as performers in the local music scene; however, racism and racial exclusion, especially segregation of performance venues, may have precluded all but the most superficial interaction between white and African American teen musicians.

Second, I chose a working-class milieu far from the major recording centers of New York and Los Angeles to understand what personal and cultural resources could be marshaled by aspiring teen musicians with no family, personal, or business connections to the music industry. My working hypothesis is that the first wave of truly homegrown rock and roll teenage performance groups came largely from such modest backgrounds. In future work, I plan to test this hypothesis by contrasting the rate at which bands formed and dissolved in this area compared to the rate in the more affluent and predominately white suburbs north and west of the city.

Finally, I chose this area because it is a region for which there is systematic data about teenage musical tastes and practices in the immediate post-Elvis era. This data is from the survey and interview research done by James Coleman and his colleagues in nine Illinois high schools in 1957 and published in his book, *The Adolescent Society* (Coleman 1961). Coleman's data is the only systematic survey data available on teenage engagement with popular music during the early rock and roll era.

I define a teenage band as any local teenage rock and roll performance group that had a drummer, at least one electric guitarist, a band name, and a business card. With this definition, I have identified most if not all of the local bands of this region from the post-Elvis, pre-Beatles era (1958 through 1963). I have been interviewing the people who performed in those bands as well as the people who ran the venues where the bands performed, who sold the instruments the teen musicians played, who worked in the record stores where teenagers shopped and hung out, and who regularly frequented the performances.

GRASSROOTS PERFORMANCE AND STATUS ATTAINMENT

Much of my scholarship over the past twenty-five years has addressed how structures and processes within and among organizations shape an individual's career. My collaborator Denise Bielby and I made the "cultural turn" by applying this approach to understand the dynamics of age, gender, and racial stratification of film and television writers and to analyze how mediating institutions like talent agencies broker labor markets and shape careers in Hollywood (Bielby and Bielby 2002). Similar substantive concerns led me to approach teenage musical performance as embedded in a status attainment process stratified by gender, race, and age.

The emergence of the local, grassroots rock and roll band phenomenon among teenagers in the late 1950s is especially interesting from the perspective of organizations and stratification. First, it is profoundly stratified by gender, race, and age. Teenage girls were, with only rare exception, excluded from the local bands of that era. The music had roots in African American traditions but was performed primarily by white teens for white audiences. And, of course, the music was marketed to a specific age group, and, some scholars claim, a very specific kind of youth subculture developed around it. Second, those first-generation grassroots bands were organized more or less autonomously from schools, workplaces, and other formal institutions. Therefore, it is unlikely that the highly structured patterns of gender, race, and age stratification can be linked directly to specific policies and practices within organizations. Understanding how stratified cultural practices emerge through informal and semiautonomous social interaction among ordinary people presents a unique challenge to cultural sociologists interested in social inequality.

THE TEEN BAND'S EMERGENCE AS A MALE-DOMINATED CULTURAL FORM

The teen rock and roll band that emerged in the late 1950s quickly became institutionalized as a male-dominated form of subcultural involvement in musical performance. Why? Consider Joe's story again. He acquired his guitar, and he taught himself how to play it. It is a distinctive feature of the grassroots rock world, one highlighted by Ruth Finnegan (1989) in her fasci-

nating study, *The Hidden Musicians*, that these musicians are largely self-taught and have launched their careers as grassroots performers largely outside of formal organizations. In this way, their world is closer to that of grassroots folk music than that of either the orchestral or jazz musician. And the first generation of grassroots rock and rollers were making up the cultural form of the homegrown band as they went along.

Today, a teenager with Joe's musical interests would have no problem finding like-minded individuals to make music collectively. In the local arts and entertainment weekly or on the Internet, she or he can readily find notices of music-making opportunities like those listed in Table 2. Indeed, these examples provide a sense of the rich, highly differentiated institutional field an aspiring grassroots musician would encounter. Consider, for example, the subgenres identified here—"cover band" with Petty, Little Feat influences, "Voodoo" influenced by Johnny Cash, Bauhaus, X, and so on. Interestingly, while a number of these advertisements make reference to age, none mention gender, either explicitly or implicitly (perhaps because of the paper's antidiscrimination policies).

In contrast, in Joe's era, the late 1950s, these subgenre categories and the model for starting a band did not exist. Indeed, the term "garage band," which is often assumed to have originated in the early rock and roll era, did not gain currency until more than a decade later, after the phenomenon of the teen band had become well established and taken for granted. So what about the immediate post-Elvis era? I started thinking about it this way when I began my project:

- See Elvis on TV
- Decide you want to be Elvis
- Ask Mom & Dad to get you a guitar
- Discover you are not Elvis
- Now what to do with that guitar? Learn how to play
- Start a band? But how?

So, perhaps there is a simple reason why women were excluded. Teenage boys saw Elvis impress the girls, so they got their friends, other teenage boys, to start bands with them. Girls need not apply. However, my research indicates that there is much more to the story, involving the relationship between rock and roll and high school culture in the post-Elvis era.

Today, it is taken for granted that the teen rock band is, and always has been, a male domain. However, a large body of scholarship demonstrates that it is always possible to make attributions after the fact to explain why a line of work is dominated by men or by women, even when the objective circumstances at the time a field is emerging do not dictate that outcome (Reskin 1988, Tuchman 1989, Reskin and Roos 1990). A closer look at the teen popular music scene in the immediate post-Elvis era suggests that it was no exception. First, in the mid-1950s, before the explosive expansion of rock and roll music on AM radio, popular music was not particularly male dominated. According to Groce and Cooper (1990), women accounted for a third of the artists on the singles charts in 1955. High school yearbook photos from that era clearly show that the gender balance was relatively mixed among participants in organized school music programs (Figure 1). And, in the post-Elvis era, the girls are present on the teen music scene, even if they were not on the bandstand (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Women Are As Involved As Men in School Music Programs

Table 2. Musician Help-wanted Advertisements, Summer 2003

BASS PLAYER wanted young, well equipped, pro., rock/pop, aggressive, success minded, JDL xxx-xxxx
 BLUES/ HARP PLAYER seeks acoustic blues guitar player to jam with 1-2 times a week. Call Dan xxx-xxxx
 DRUMMER WANTED: The Hollywood Horrors seek young, pro, well-equipped, rock drummer. JDL xxx-xxxx
 EXPERIENCED LEAD Singer wanted for established SB band, age 20-30. Call Ryan xxx-xxxx
 ISO GUITARIST w/Vocal for Cover Band. Infl: Petty, Band, Little Feat. Call Cy, xxx-xxxx
 ISO RHYTHM guitar for Voodoo-billy band. Infl: Johnny Cash- Danzig- Bauhaus & X. Have gigs/CDs xxx-xxxx

Advertisements from "Music Callboard," *Santa Barbara Independent*.



Figure 2. At Teen Clubs, Girls Are on the Dance Floor, not on the Bandstand

The data collected by Coleman and his colleagues and published in *The Adolescent Society* show that high school age girls listened to music as a leisure activity nearly three times as much as boys (Coleman 1961:13; Figure 3). Coleman's data also show that girls were more attentive to popular music than boys were, at least as reflected in their purchasing habits. Although the difference was modest, the percentage of teenage girls buying records was higher than it was for boys, and among those purchasing records, girls were purchasing more on average than were boys (Coleman 1961, Figure 2.2 p. 20). Other data collected by

Coleman (1961:14) indicate that, in the post-Elvis era, girls were generally more attuned to popular culture than boys were. Compared to boys, the same-sex friendship activities of girls were more likely to be organized around going to dances and movies (Figure 4). Also, the Coleman data as well as other studies indicate that, in the 1950s and 1960s, female high school students were more oriented towards success in social realms than were boys (Eder 1985; Eder and Parker 1987). All these factors suggest that, compared to boys, girls would be as inclined, if not more inclined, to engage in popular music, not just as listeners, but as performers.

Given the participation of teenage girls in other forms of musical performance and engagement with popular music, what explains their absence from the bandstand? One explanation draws on the mythology that 1950s rock and roll was the anthem of male teenage rebellion and male sexuality, which was portrayed in films like *Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and the *Wild One* and personified in Elvis's early television performances. Martin and Segrave (1993) describe the emergence of rock and roll from 1953 to 1962 in *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll*. They provide the following account of early rock and roll as teen rebellion:

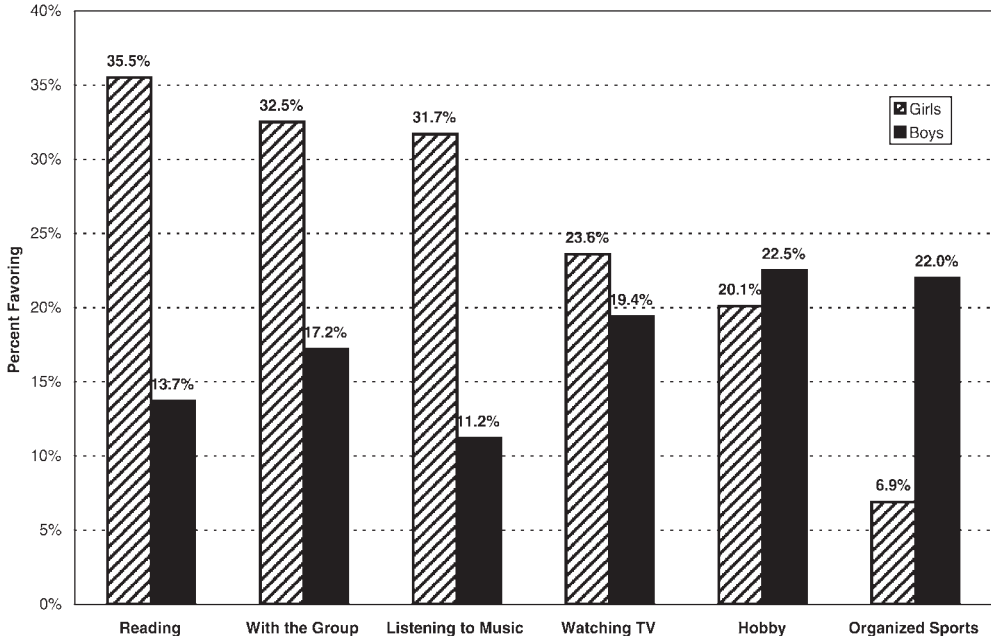


Figure 3. Leisure Activities of High School Boys and Girls, 1957

Note: Data adapted from Coleman 1961 (Table 5, p. 13).

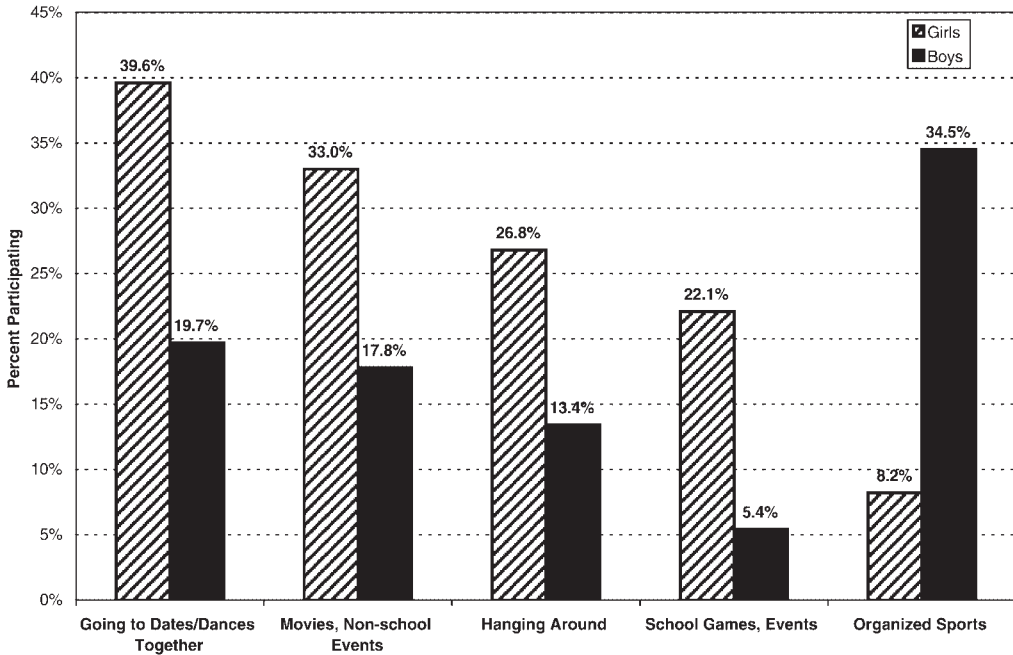


Figure 4. Activities and Interests that Friends Have in Common: High School Boys and Girls 1957

Note: Data adapted from Coleman 1961 (Table 6, p. 14).

Adults resisted teen culture in order to regain their authority over the young. The battle took place in many areas, but nowhere was the conflict more intense than in the music. Rock was particularly threatening because young people often wrote, played, and performed it themselves. . . . From the beginning rock and roll was viewed by the adult world as the clarion call to teenagers to rise up and defy their elders, to flaunt morality, to mock their ideals, to break away from adult control, to reject the adult world. The adult world was determined to undermine rock and roll. . . . (Martin and Segrave 1993:14)

While this account is exaggerated to say the least, sociologists writing in respectable venues have reproduced a version of this account (Dotter 1987, 1995), sometimes dressed up in the “moral panic” jargon of the social problems literature (Cohen 2002). And, of course, the male teen rebel has been immortalized in rock and roll songs, as in the Phil Spector-produced hit by the Crystals:

He’s a rebel and he’ll never ever be any good.
 He’s a rebel and he’ll never ever be understood.
 And just because he doesn’t do what everybody
 else does,
 that’s no reason why I can’t give him all my love

Lyrics by Gene Pitney, “He’s A Rebel”

In sum, the “teen rebel” explanation of rock and roll as a male domain goes as follows: Rebellious teenager boys of the era were drawn to “authentic” rock and roll, with its African American roots and charged sexuality. The boys picked up their electric guitars and turned up the volume on their amplifiers as acts of defiance against parents and teachers, a theme that runs through scores of rock and roll songs from the 1950s to the present. In contrast, teenage girls of the era were more engaged with popular culture, but they were less rebellious. They were drawn to softer, more highly produced music, to songs with orchestral accompaniment and narratives of romance, not the kind of music that lends itself to grassroots performance. This is a coherent account, consistent with cultural scripts about rock and roll, but it does not fit the data from the post-Elvis era. In 1957, Coleman and his team found that rock and roll music was the favorite musical style for about half of the high school boys as well as for about half of the high school girls they surveyed (1961:23). At the height of Elvis Presley’s popularity, when Coleman and his team surveyed these teens about their favorite artists, they found that, for *both* boys and girls, by far the most popular artist was not Elvis Presley, the authentic rock

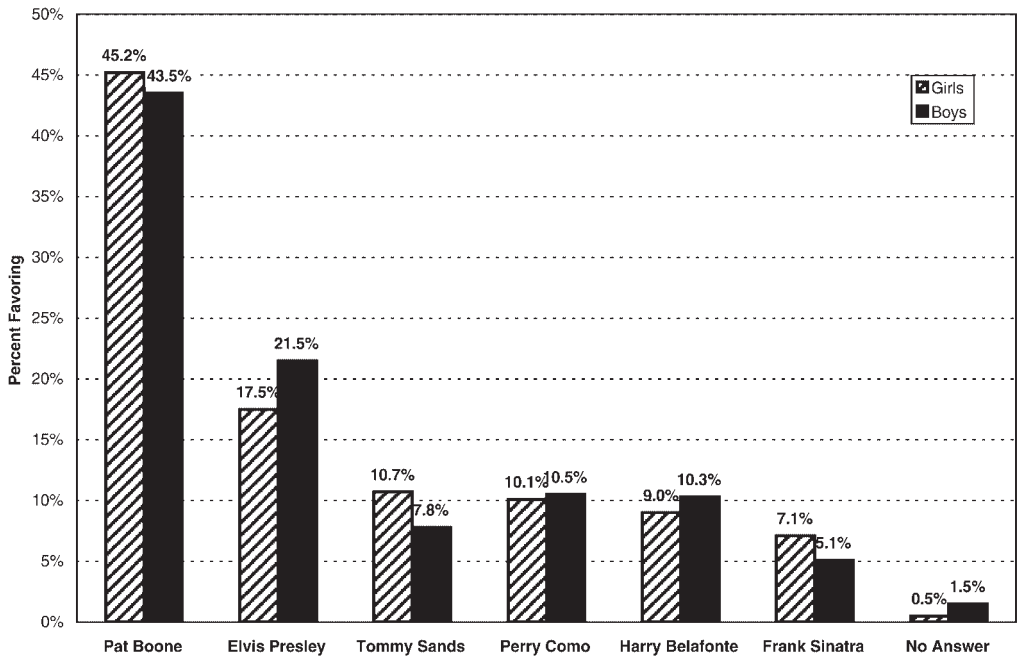


Figure 5. Favorite Recording Artist: High School Boys and Girls, 1957

Note: Data adapted from Coleman 1961 (Table 8, p. 22).

and roller, but Pat Boone, whose early success was based on bland “cover” versions of songs originally recorded by African American artists (Figure 5).

Missing from the “teen rebel” account is any serious consideration of the social organization of schools and how that intersects with teenager subcultural involvements. In fact, there is a significant body of sociological scholarship that I believe provides the basis for a more complete account of why the teen band phenomenon emerged as an almost exclusively male domain. As can be seen in the Coleman data in Figure 3, the most significant subcultural pursuit for teenage boys in 1957 was organized sports. Even today, organized sports is the main cultural event of high school life, and that was even more true in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Rehberg and Schafer 1968; Spreitzer and Pugh 1973; Otto and Alwin 1977). For boys, it provided what DiMaggio has called, in a somewhat different context, a “status culture” (DiMaggio 1982). In their 1985 article on high school cultural participation and adult attainment, DiMaggio and Mohr wrote the following:

The ability to participate in a status culture is a cultural resource that permits actors to get ahead by

managing impressions, developing positive local reputations, impressing gatekeepers, and constructing social networks that may be useful in educational, marital, and occupational attainment. . . . [It] enables individuals . . . to sustain relationships with those in control of the allocation of rewards that constitutes the stratification process. (1985:1235).

While they were writing about teen participation in elite culture (literature, the arts, classical music), a large body of sociological scholarship demonstrates rather conclusively that for boys, organized sports works in just this way (Eitzen 1975, Kessler et al. 1985, Eder and Parker 1987).

The central role of sports in high school peer cultures was first documented systematically by Coleman (1961) in *The Adolescent Society*, and elegantly revisited and revised by Donna Eder and Stephen Parker in an article that appeared in *Sociology of Education* in 1987. Three important insights from their work are relevant to understanding rock and roll performance versus organized sports as teen subcultural pursuits. The first is that high school sports is a *formally organized school-sponsored activity* that exposes participants—mostly boys, even

to this day, but especially so in the post-Elvis era—to a value system that emphasizes not just teamwork but also unequal status and rewards, hierarchy, and competition. The second is that this value system is then incorporated, in modified form, into the teens' own informal peer groups and status hierarchies. The third is that as a result, contrary to the claims of Coleman in the early 1960s and the British cultural studies scholars after that (e.g., Willis 1977; Hebdige 1984), the peer group value system that emerges is one that is formed and sustained largely in accord with, rather than in opposition to, the dominant value system.

How do organized sports activities contrast with involvement in rock and roll performance? A theme that comes up in almost all of my interviews with the former teen musicians, consistent with what DiMaggio (1982) and others (e.g., Bourdieu 1977) have written about elite culture and social standing, is a narrative about status as culturally enacted. For teenage boys entering high school in the 1950s, more so than today, there were few alternative paths to peer status outside of organized sports. But for boys lacking the physical strength and skill, success in organized sports was not an option. To teens of Joe's era, demonstrating competence in rock and roll performance was seen as a potential means of gaining the same kind of peer acceptance as one does from being athletically competent—and again, and in my interviews, it is typically articulated in just that way.

For a culturally aware teenage boy with a guitar, inventing a rock and roll identity is relatively straightforward and requires little in the way of material resources. For example, white bucks, rolled up jeans or polished cotton pants with a buckle on the back, sleeves rolled up two turns on a short-sleeved shirt, and a skinny belt buckled on the side would make a teenage boy immediately recognizable as part of teen music subculture in Chicago's south suburbs in the late 1950s (Figure 6). Moreover, it is easy for such a boy to acquire the cultural codes that define the appropriate presentation of self by observing peer culture and by exposure to mass media via television, radio, and teen magazines.¹

¹ However, even with the appropriate clothes, haircut, language, pose, and \$25 mail-order guitar, the young man still faces the dilemma that confronted Joe and other teen musicians. In 1957, even after learn-

While participation in rock and roll performance was an alternative route to status for some teenage boys, it was not its functional equivalent. On the one hand, for the athletically challenged teen boy of this era, successfully enacting this rock and roll image could provide a status similar to the male athlete. In the socially and culturally segregated milieu of the late 1950s, this role could give him standing not just with his male peers, but with girls too. On the other hand, there are some very important differences in the social organization of the two status cultures—organized sports and rock and roll performance. Most importantly, the latter had absolutely no standing in the schools of the immediate post-Elvis era, and that remained true in most schools into the late 1960s. Though not actively suppressed as some accounts maintain, being in a rock and roll band was in no way an official school extracurricular activity. School venues were largely off limits to local rock and roll bands until around the Beatles era. Putting together and participating in a band was completely autonomous from teachers, counselors, formal curricula, informal curricula, and, to a large extent, parental authority. While the initial motivation was often to enhance one's standing in the school's status hierarchy, if anything,

ing how to play the guitar reasonably well, there are no established models or pathways for seeking out and assembling like-minded teens to perform rock and roll. How teens from working-class families invented and institutionalized the "rock combo" as a cultural form is the subject of my ongoing research on teenage grassroots cultural production.



Figure 6. Enacting a Rock and Roll Presentation of Self

participation in an even modestly successful band drew teens away from the “extracurriculum” and provided some distance between their music world and the school value system.

In fact, participation in this kind of status culture has more in common with what sociologists have described as deviant subcultural involvements. John Hagan (1991), borrowing the concept of “subcultural drift” from David Matza’s early work in control theory (Matza 1964), developed a model of the consequences of participation in deviant subcultures for adult attainments. In his work, Hagan criticized conventional status attainment models for being overly deterministic and for giving inadequate attention to the contingent ways movement in and out of various adolescent subcultural involvements—located between deviance and conformity—can alter life-course trajectories. Hagan also recognized that DiMaggio’s cultural stratification approach could be applied productively to study the consequences of engagement with “lowbrow” culture and devalued status cultures. Literally, Hagan wanted to put “the fun and thrill-seeking side of teenage culture” back into status attainment and cultural stratification research, noting that certain kinds of mildly deviant subcultural involvements might have positive effects on later attainments (Hagan 1991:570). And, again, drawing from control theory, Hagan’s model addresses how the level of parental direction and control influences subcultural involvements.

Hagan’s effort to use control theory to bring subcultural participation into status attainment models also tempers the strategic, prospectively rational imagery that I invoked above. Indeed, the former teen rock and rollers I interviewed can now, as adults, tell a story about making a choice to engage the performance subculture of rock and roll music to enact an identity that had currency in their high school status culture. And there is more contemporary qualitative research done in high schools that does not rely on retrospective accounts, which also suggests such strategic behavior is common. One of the better studies is the provocatively titled article, “From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School” by David Kinney (1993). Kinney’s research shows how some students labeled as “nerds” in middle school deliberately choose to engage in specific high school

activities to successfully enact a new, higher status personal identity.

However, teens also drift into participation in the grassroots rock performance subculture, and indeed—given its autonomy from adult institutions—they may simply take to it because it is fun and fulfilling. Regardless of the motivating factors, Hagan’s elaboration of the cultural stratification approach and his quantitative research suggest that such participation can have, and is likely to have, consequences for school experiences and outcomes, the transition to adulthood, and adult attainments.

While the qualitative work I have completed does not provide definitive empirical support for the idea of subcultural engagement in rock and roll performance as a status-enhancing process, Hagan’s research, based on panel data on teens in Toronto in the late 1970s, has some intriguing findings that resonate with some of what I found in my interviews. His work also suggests why it is sociologically interesting to study grassroots cultural production from a status attainment perspective. Besides more serious forms of deviance, Hagan analyzed “party subculture” (parties, concerts, drinking, dating) as an intervening variable. He found that a parental control measure reduced girls’ engagement with party subculture, but that was not the case for boys (Hagan 1991:575–6). Several of my interviews suggest that this was a factor keeping girls out of the band scene in the immediate post-Elvis era as well. Specifically, some parents were willing to tolerate their sons devoting school nights to band practice and weekends to performances throughout the greater Chicago area, but allowing their daughters to do the same was inconceivable.

Another intriguing finding in Hagan’s study is that, for men of non-working-class origins, identification with party subculture, as expected, is associated with lower educational attainment; however, the net effect of that is positive. That is, among middle class men with comparable schooling, those who identified with the party subculture when they were teens eventually had higher occupational attainments (Hagan 1991:576–80). Hagan speculated that this kind of subcultural involvement socializes young men into leisure pursuits that become the basis for social bonds and for gendered social networks as adults. Therefore, participating in a subculture—like the rock music performance scene—could have an effect similar to, for

example, college fraternity life (e.g., the “frat band”) and careers where after-hours socializing (or on-the-job socializing) is an important part of workplace culture.

In sum, in the early days of rock and roll, grassroots performance was an “empty field” (Tuchman 1989) not yet dominated by males or by females. In terms of tastes and talent, teenage girls were as engaged with the music as were teenage boys. The absence of girls from the performance scene cannot be explained by skills or preferences, nor is it plausible to attribute their exclusion to gendered responses to musical narratives about rebellion and romance. Instead, their near total exclusion from grassroots performance is more plausibly explained by the distinctive way in which rock and roll performance created an opening for enactment of status roles autonomous from and in response to the school-sanctioned and gendered status hierarchy of organized sports. Because rock and roll performance was sustained outside the high school extracurriculum, the act of assembling a band, practicing, and, especially, performing meant that teen musicians would be participating mostly away from home and away from direct adult supervision. That aspect of the subculture likely made most parents much more reluctant to allow their daughters, rather than their sons, to participate in the performance of rock and roll music at the grassroots level. Finally, research on the adult consequences of mildly deviant subcultural involvements suggests that the teenage boys who performed in bands early in the rock and roll era may have acquired a kind of lowbrow cultural capital that had a positive effect on status attainment in male-dominated occupational settings.

By the mid-1960s, the grassroots rock and roll band had been fully institutionalized as a male-dominated cultural form. For decades, the women who had participated in bands had done so primarily in gendered roles, such as vocalists. They were rarely accepted by either fellow musicians or audiences as instrumentalists, especially as guitarists or drummers. Also, women typically had been marginalized in the band’s decision-making processes (Groce and Cooper 1995). As Mary Ann Clawson (1999) has shown, the one area women have made inroads more recently is as bassists in alternative rock bands. But even there, Clawson demonstrates, the gains have come about through a mechanism that is typical of other

work roles that become feminized: the skill becomes devalued as men’s work, leading to male flight, and women enter as new feminized cultural scripts developed to rationalize the task as “women’s work.”

ROCK AND ROLL NEVER DIES? RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNTS OF THE DECISION TO LEAVE THE PERFORMANCE SCENE

We know from research on the careers of artists in contemporary society that sustaining any kind of artistic career into and through adulthood is extremely difficult (e.g., Becker 1951 on jazz musicians; Baker and Faulkner 1991 on careers in the motion picture industry; Bielby and Bielby 2002 on film and television writers), and the first generation of homegrown rock and roll musicians is no exception. Nevertheless, in my interviews, I was surprised by how many of the former teen musicians did sustain musical careers through at least part of their adult lives, approximately half of those I have contacted. The transition to adulthood and the intersection of professional and family life course trajectories is a central concern of status attainment scholars, but their approach rarely has been applied to participation in grassroots cultural pursuits.

The life course transitions of grassroots musicians whose careers started in the post-Elvis era provide an interesting contrast to the dominant pattern of the time. Describing the trend of the last century, Glen Elder wrote the following:

The range of choice and action in the lives of late-nineteenth-century youth has been replaced by a more tightly organized schedule of contingent transitions to adult status. Early life transitions are more compressed and contingent because they are more constrained by the scheduling of formal institutions. Control over these transitions has shifted from the family of origin, which allowed a wide measure of flexibility, to young people themselves and the generalized requirements of school and workplace. (1980:33)

For the first cohort of grassroots rock and roll musicians who earned any sort of living from their craft, the transitions were far from being tightly organized or strongly shaped by the requirements of formal institutions. The life cycle transitions of a musician attempting to sustain a career in a struggling, never famous, or

“almost famous” rock group through the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond is almost always out of synch with those of family members and peers whose professional lives are not in the realms of music and art.

For most people who decided to stay with the band after leaving school, the initial decision to attempt to sustain a musical career was motivated less by considerations of fame and fortune than by a passion for the music and performance, an “art for arts sake” orientation to their craft (Caves 2000), even if they were just performing “covers” of top 40 songs. As Joe put it, in the period following high school graduation in 1962, “it wasn’t about the money”:

Like I said, back then it wasn’t about the money anyway. We would play if we didn’t get a nickel. [Were you living at home at this time?] I was still at home, yeah. [Did you have a day job?] Not at that time, No. All I did was music. Uh, and like I said, it was just fun. It was what we wanted to do. I mean, we were basically, still young. Obviously you had these dreams that you are going to become famous. Well to us, a great day was we’d go on a Sunday afternoon. Jim Lounsbury used to do a lot of dances at the Chicagoland Music Hall, 32 West Randolph, down the street from the Greyhound station. They’d have a lot of military guys on leave. We’d do a gig there in the afternoon, he’d pay us fifteen bucks a man, we’d go to Michigan. Fifteen bucks a man. We’d pack up the gig there, then we’d head out to Elgin and do the Blue Moon Ballroom in Elgin that night for fifteen dollars. And we made thirty dollars that night and thought we were rich!

From my interviews, consistent with other scholarship (e.g., Finnegan 1989, Ch. 19), I found that the effects on marriage and family life are exactly what is expected given the nature of the job, the timing of those other life-course transitions, and the nature of the times. This is the first generation of rock musicians trying to “go pro” just before and into the era when young people’s lives were profoundly affected by the military draft, urban unrest, social movements, drug cultures, etc. Almost all of my interviewees tell a story about hanging on, waiting to make it, despite economic hardship and turmoil, and then eventually confronting the fact that the big break just was not going to happen. The stories all have a similar structure, regardless of whether the people were in their twenties, thirties, forties, or even older when the “stay or leave” decision became unavoidable. The story invariably involves a narrative along the lines of “even

though I did not make it, it was worth it.” But as they relate these stories, it becomes apparent that they are trying to convince *themselves* as much as they are trying to convince the interviewer. For Joe, the decision to give it up came shortly after he turned 30. Despite tours to Europe and Japan and modest success in Las Vegas with a racially integrated soul band, he realized that a musical career was no longer viable:

We just got fed up with that; bookings were getting harder to come by, we thought we could get back into Vegas. But, the country was in somewhat of a recession at that time. And the gigs at the lounges and hotels, where the ‘up-and-coming’ groups could get them, now, big stars—that aren’t as big as they once were—were taking those gigs. The guys trying to come up, [they were] squeezing them out. So we never could get back into Vegas.

And I remember Bill Fix had gotten an audition for us with the producer from the Rolling Stones. And the guitar player was two hours late for the audition. He had gotten us a country club to do this audition. I can remember walking around on the tennis court, I think I was like 26 or 27 years old at the time. And I had like 50 bucks to my name. And I had a long talk with myself. I said, you know what? That’s not even two dollars a year for every year you’ve lived on this earth. I know I can do better. And my parents had been after me to quit. I had gone through . . . well, I was not divorced then, but all but. And I had told everybody, when it is time to quit, I won’t need anybody to tell me. I’ll know. And I told myself right then and there, you know what, it’s time to go. . . . And that was just the final straw to me. I said, You know what, my livelihood is depending on all of us pulling that rope the same way. If you got two or three guys pulling in a different direction, it isn’t going to work. I mean I gave it my best shot, it must not have been intended to be, it’s time for me to go home and do something else with my life. So that’s when I made up my mind that I was out of it. And I came home.

Kal, the most successful of my interviewees, made the transition from a regional touring bar band to a major recording contract in the 1970s, recorded some critically acclaimed but only modestly successful albums over the years, and sustained a career with session work and gigging with several incarnations of a highly regarded blues band. At the time of our interview, he was still performing at his blues club in Palm Springs, but he had just put the club up for sale. As Kal is turning 60, his words echo Joe’s story. He faces a similar dilemma regarding his com-

mitment to music and the challenges of surviving financially:

I'm not sure, as far as my next chapter. "In the life of," you know. I'm not really sure where it is going to take me. But, uh, I can't really see me without a guitar in my hand. Although, uh, I read the writing on the wall. I mean, the record business is kind of no more. I mean, there's millions of dollars being made by somebody. I don't see it in the future for me. Like, to break into the record business now would be pretty impossible. But, uh, I will find a next thing, you know, and there's going to be music in there somewhere, so, that's where I'm goin'.

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF GRASSROOTS CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Cultural sociologists who have studied popular music have focused almost exclusively on the production, distribution, and consumption of music created commercially for a mass market. Very few sociologists have studied the way ordinary people become involved in the creation and performance of popular music, and hardly any scholarship addresses the emergence of new cultural forms of grassroots performance, such as the teen rock and roll band. A small but growing body of social science scholarship examines gender and racial stratification of careers in culture industries, but little of that research focuses on grassroots participation. While it is no surprise that the grassroots rock and roll performance scene was distinctively structured by gender and race even before the teen band became institutionalized as a cultural form, there has been little serious scholarship on why this was the case, given the similarities in musical talents and tastes by gender and the origins of rock and roll in African American musical genres. I argue here that the young people who formed the first bands did so outside of the structured environment of the schools and mostly independent of adult supervision. Nevertheless, the social structure and status system of the schools and segregated community institutions most likely contributed substantially, albeit indirectly, to the emergence of the teen band as an almost exclusively white male cultural form.

Although it has been mostly ignored by cultural sociologists, participation in grassroots rock and roll musical performance was both

meaningful and consequential in the lives of those who entered that world. This effect is especially true during their school age years and almost certainly into young adulthood. It may also hold during later adulthood, as some benefit from returns to "popular cultural capital." Whether those who entered that world did so strategically as part of the management of personal identity or drifted into it in a search for fun and excitement is an open question. There is much to learn about what sustains them in creative pursuits into adulthood. The answers to these research questions have implications for how young people are drawn into creative sub-cultural involvements outside of formal institutional structures and the circumstances under which grassroots performance as an adolescent becomes a viable work option as an adult, despite the almost inevitable social and economic hardships of an artistic career. Moreover, retrospective accounts of the musical careers of former teen performers show how these people find personal meaning in experiences that almost always fell far short of early aspirations. Such accounts also show how they justify to themselves and others that the choices they made during the course of chaotic careers were valid ones. Sociologists who study popular culture are only beginning to study its aesthetic content (Bielby and Bielby 2004), and the personal accounts of my interviewees suggest that there is much to be learned by engaging issues of interpretation as they apply to the meaning creative performers find in their work. Finally, I have attempted to demonstrate here that theories and models from "mainstream" areas—such as status attainment, life course, and deviance paradigms—can be as useful to advancing knowledge about grassroots cultural engagements as are the most fashionable interpretive approaches from around the bend of the "cultural turn."

William T. Bielby is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is currently a Visiting Scholar at the American Bar Foundation. His research specialties include organizational inequality, labor markets, research methods, media & popular culture, and gender. He is currently doing research on employment practices liability insurance and its impact on both organizational responses to equal employment opportunity (EEO) issues and the dynamics of discrimination litigation.

REFERENCES

- Baker, Wayne E. and Robert R. Faulkner. 1991. "Role as Resource in the Hollywood Film Industry." *American Journal of Sociology* 97:279–309.
- Becker, Howard S. 1951. "The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience." *American Journal of Sociology* 57:136–44.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." Pp. 487–511 in *Power and Ideology in Education*, edited by Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey. New York: Oxford.
- Bielby, Denise D. and William T. Bielby. 2004. "Audience Aesthetics and Popular Culture." Forthcoming in *Matters of Culture: Cultural Sociology in Practice*, edited by Roger Friedland and John Mohr. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2002. "Hollywood Dreams, Hard Realities: Writing for Film and Television." *Contexts* 1:21–7.
- Caves, Richard E. 2000. *Creative Industries: Contracts Between Art and Commerce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clawson, Mary Ann. 1999. "When Women Play the Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music." *Gender & Society* 13:193–210.
- Cohen, Stanley. 2002. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers*. London: Routledge.
- Coleman, James S. 1961. *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education*. New York: Free Press.
- DiMaggio, Paul. 1982. "Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on the Grades of U.S. High School Students." *American Sociological Review* 47:189–201.
- DiMaggio, Paul and John Mohr. 1985. "Cultural Capital, Educational Attainment and Marital Selection." *American Sociological Review* 90:1231–61.
- Dotter, Daniel. 1987. "Growing Up Is Hard to Do: Rock and Roll Performers as Cultural Heroes." *Sociological Spectrum* 7:25–44.
- . 1995. "Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay: Youth Subculture, Deviance, and Social Typing in Rock's Early Years." Pp. 87–114 in *Adolescents and their Music: If It's Too Loud, You're Too Old*, edited by Jonathan S. Epstein. New York: Garland.
- Eder Donna. 1985. "The Cycle of Popularity: Interpersonal Relations Among Female Adolescents." *Sociology of Education* 58:154–65.
- Eder, Donna and Stephen Parker. 1987. "The Cultural Production and Reproduction of Gender: The Effects of Extracurricular Activities on Peer-Group Culture." *Sociology of Education* 60:200–13.
- Eitzen, Stanley D. 1975. "Athletics in the Status System of Male Adolescents: A Replication of Coleman's 'The Adolescent Society'." *Adolescence* 10:267–76.
- Elder, Glen. 1980. "Adolescence in Historical Perspective." Pp. 3–46 in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, edited by J. Andelson. New York: Wiley.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town*. New York: Cambridge.
- Groce, Stephen B. and Margaret Cooper. 1990. "Just Me and the Boys: Women in Local-Level Rock and Roll." *Gender & Society* 4:220–9.
- Hagan, John. 1991. "Destiny and Drift: Subcultural Preferences, Status Attainments, and The Risks and Rewards of Youth." *American Sociological Review* 56:567–82.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1984. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Kessler, Sandra, Dean Ashenden, Robert W. Connell, and Gary Dowsett. 1985. "Gender Relations in Secondary Schooling." *Sociology of Education* 58:34–47.
- Kinney, David A. 1993. "From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School." *Sociology of Education* 66:21–40.
- Martin, Linda and Kerry Segrave. 1993. *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock'n'Roll*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Matza, David. 1964. *Delinquency and Drift*. New York: Wiley.
- Otto, Luther and Duane Alwin. 1977. "Athletics, Aspirations and Attainments." *Sociology of Education* 42: 102–13.
- Rehberg, Richard A. and Walter E. Schafer. 1968. "Participation in Interscholastic Athletics and College Expectations." *American Journal of Sociology* 73:732–40.
- Reskin, Barbara F. 1988. "Bringing Men Back In: Sex Differentiation and the Devaluation of Women's Work." *Gender & Society* 2:58–81.
- Reskin, Barbara F. and Patricia A. Roos. 1990. *Job Queues, Gender Queues: Explaining Women's Inroads into Male Occupations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rosen, Louis. 1998. *The South Side: The Racial Transformation of an American Neighborhood*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Spreitzer, Elmer and Meredith Pugh. 1973. "Interscholastic Athletics and Educational Expectations." *Sociology of Education* 46:171–82.
- Tauber, Karl E. and Alma F. Tauber. 1965. *Negroes in Cities: Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Change*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Tuchman, Gaye. 1989. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labour*. London: Saxon House.