



REBEL REDUX: THE SHANGRI-LAS, GIRL REBELLION, AND THE COLD WAR

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In the mid-1960s, a group of teenaged girls released a spate of highly emotional, vividly realized songs that consistently placed high on pop charts both in the United States and the United Kingdom. The group, called the Shangri-Las, was composed of sisters Mary and Betty Weiss and twins Marge and Mary Ann Ganser. The girls began singing together as high school students in Queens, New York, before rocketing to fame upon the 1964 release of their first major single: “Remember (Walking in the Sand).” Their recorded body of work is small, comprised of only around thirty songs, and by 1968 the group had disbanded amid murky circumstances and legal trouble. Today, scholars remember their work as marked by an intense, melodramatic aesthetic and themes of premature death, bad boyfriends, and girl rebellion. Youthful rebellion is a well-documented Cold War cultural trope that appears in many pop culture products of the time, and these transgressive teenagers came to stand for much more than simple adolescent strife. As the work of psychoanalysts Robert Lindner and Erik Erikson gained notoriety, a multiplicity of meanings accrued in the teenage rebel archetype. Still, despite their multivalence as cultural symbols, Cold War rebels looked remarkably homogenous. The best-known rebel figures are young, middle-class, white, and male. In this piece, I suggest that current work on the archetype of the rebel in Cold War popular culture has not adequately addressed girl rebellion. I propose that the Shangri-Las’ songs should be seriously considered as examples of female rebel narratives that trouble Cold War anxieties about freedom, nationhood, and capitalism.

The figure of the youthful rebel is tightly bound up in American Cold War thought and Fordist capitalist practice. The idea of adolescence as a uniquely rebellious phase of life was initially popularized by psychologists Erik Erikson and Robert Lindner, and by midcentury rebellious young men were a staple in many cultural products. Lindner vividly described his psychoanalytic work with a young penitentiary inmate in *Rebel Without a Cause: The Story of a Criminal Psychopath* (1944). He considered rebelling against social norms a key driver of progress and a way to improve a “‘sick’ society



that considered itself healthy” (Waage 1999, 25). In his second book, *Prescription for Rebellion* (1952), Lindner also urged parents to cultivate rebellion in their children in order to support healthy development. Erikson similarly introduced the concept of an “identity crisis” in his text *Childhood and Society* (1950). In this volume, Erikson proposed that the identity crisis, or rebellion against parental control, is a key stage in psychological development in which adolescents define their individual identities apart from their parents. The work of both these writers helped normalize and popularize the idea of rebellion as an expected part of adolescent self-formation and a net positive for society at large. By the end of the 1950s, the figure of a young rebel was well-known in American cultural life.

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, however, Erikson and Lindner’s work came to have additional significance. Both writers explicitly mapped the term “identity” and the stages of psychological development onto the collective identities of nations, conceptually linking the rebel archetype and national anxieties. In the final section of *Childhood and Society*, Erikson discusses the development of a Russian “national identity” (Erikson 1950, Ch. 10). Soviet Russia, Erikson argues, is characterized by a sort of botched rebellion, in which Russia’s revolution was an identity crisis that ultimately failed, ending in communist oppression. Lindner similarly labelled the Soviet Union a negative example of rebellion, while characterizing the United States as a positive symbol of defiance and triumph over tyrannical British rule. He further celebrates liberal democracy as the form of governance that properly “protect[s] the human instinct to rebel against social constraints and thereby create social progress” (Medovoi 2005, 32). In this way, Erikson and Lindner expanded their theories of psychological development to symbolize the development of nations. The rebel archetype followed suit. No longer only a symbol of individual development, the rebel came to embody American anxieties about freedom and control.

Despite the Cold War mythology of first-world autonomy, there remained a generalized uncertainty about the relationship between liberal democracy and Fordist capitalism within the United States. The postwar material ease generated concern about the homogenizing potential of a mass-market. Were Americans really free, or were they simply mindless consumers? This uncertainty elicited “an abiding fear that Fordist consumer culture and the Cold War were not aligned, that the new suburbs did not at all constitute the sort of “free world” that the three worlds imaginary of the Cold War required America to be” (Modovoi 2005, 20). Such doubt added another level of meaning to rebels and rebel stories. Embedded within Fordist capitalism but strongly opposed to it, the teenage rebel became an ideal representation of an uneasy national identity.

While the rebel figure was common in many cultural products, histories of postwar popular music often treat rebellion as the exclusive property of rock and roll. Male figures like Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and Richie Valens are the founding fathers of



rock rebellion mythology. Indeed, Mark Laver notes that the story of rock in America is often told with as a “quasi-biblical narrative of near-death and resurrection,” with 1958 and 1959 (Presley’s conscription and Holly and Valens’ deaths, respectively) as a low point, followed by a revival with 1964’s British Invasion (Laver 2011, 433). The intervening years supposedly saw American pop music lose its spirit to bland commercialism. But this, of course, is only a partial truth. The purported musical wasteland of the 1950s and early 1960s was dominated by girl groups, or small ensembles of teenage girls singing Brill-Building pop in close harmony. Despite their lasting influence (the New York Dolls, the Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Ramones, Blondie, and many others have recorded girl group songs), girl groups are often left out of the historical narrative. In her excellent book on the subject, Jacqueline Warwick points out that scholarly work on the “music of the 1960s” often “focus[es] disproportionately on the music that was important to white, middle-class males who participated in (or at least sympathized with) left-wing political movements...[and] ignoring altogether music that emerged from the worlds of jazz, the avant-garde, and mainstream radio” (Warwick 2007, 4). While the mythical rock resurrection narrative might suggest otherwise, the late 1950s and early 1960s did have musical rebels. They were teenage girls on “mainstream radio.”

The Shangri-Las had a reputation for being the most rebellious of the girl groups. They were visually recognizable for their many publicity photos and television appearances in tight glossy “catsuits” and heels, and tales of their scandalous offstage behavior bolstered their rebellious reputation. The girls were well-known for pulling pranks, reportedly locking an “overzealous” fan in a room and “wreaking havoc” on Dick Clark at an appearance together (Grecco 2002). Lead singer Mary Weiss was nearly arrested for transporting a gun across state lines, and she attracted attention for shopping in the men’s clothing section in Greenwich Village shops (MacKinny 2012, 162, & Linna and Miller 2006). The Shangri-Las’ most famous songs, including “Leader of the Pack” (1964), “Give Him a Great Big Kiss” (1964), “Give Us Your Blessings” (1965), “Out in the Streets” (1965), “I Can Never Go Home Anymore” (1966), and “Dressed in Black” (1966), are similarly provocative. They are mostly story songs, and several famously include the dramatic, premature death of one or more characters. Despite the excellent work on girls and girl group music by Jacqueline Warwick (2007), Laurie Stras (2009), Susan Douglas (1994), Norma Coates (2003), and Nicolette Rohr (2017), most scholarly discussions of the Shangri-Las still heavily emphasize the songs’ boy rebel characters (often a bad boyfriend named Jimmy). But the songs’ girl protagonists are active agents in the drama. The male rebel figure is certainly a pervasive feature throughout the songs, but he is a secondary character with no voice of his own. Indeed, “Jimmy’s only function is to give [the girls] something to talk about” (Warwick 2007, 193). Furthermore, “Leader of the Pack” and “I Can Never Go Home Anymore,” two of the Shangri-Las’ best-known recordings, complicate the



typical rebel narrative by emphasizing rebellion's potential for harm. Both songs contain themes of time, memory, and consequences that question the viability of rebellion as a means of social progress.

"Leader of the Pack" unfolds in the form of a story told between girls. The protagonist (called Betty in the song but sung by Mary Weiss) recounts the story of her relationship with Jimmy, "the leader of the pack." Faced with the disapproval of her parents, Betty is forced to end the relationship. An emotionally distraught Jimmy then rides off into the rainy night on his motorcycle and dies in a crash. This is a familiar story: the good girl falls in love with a bad boy, thereby rebelling against her conservative parents. While Warwick posits that "the mere fact of being a rebel's girlfriend entailed real risks and represented a dangerous, exciting fantasy marketed to girls" (Warwick 2007, 197), I suggest there is more to the story here. Our knowledge of Jimmy comes solely through Betty's descriptions of him, and his demise suggests that Jimmy's rebel status emerges only in relationship to Betty rather than vice versa. In other words, when Betty ends her rebellion and obeys her parents' wishes, Jimmy ceases to exist at all.

Narrative and sonic indications of time and distance also designate "Leader of the Pack" as a rebel narrative about the aftermath of girl rebellion, rather than simply the scandal of an illicit love affair. The song begins by immediately placing the voiced characters in a narrative present. After stark bass C's in the piano, Mary Weiss is heard humming the song's melody as if to herself. Marge and Mary Ann Ganser then speak to each other as if in mid-conversation, saying: "Is she really going out with him? Well, there she is, let's ask her," before asking Weiss "Betty, is that Jimmy's ring you're wearing?" Immediately we understand that while Jimmy exists only as a rumor to the Gansers, Weiss already knows the ending to the story. Her soft humming musically foreshadows the rest of the song to come, suggesting that she has already lived through the story in question. While Weiss recounts the majority of her story in first person and past tense, realistic sounds illustrate the Jimmy's motorcycle and crash as if they are happening in the present. These seemingly out-of-time sound effects emphasize Jimmy's status as a "voiceless, ghostly figure" (MacKinney 2012, 196). The realistic sounds also draw attention to the absence of Jimmy's voice. His presence is implicitly heard, but he speaks only through the voice of Mary Weiss, singing "He stood there and asked me why...". Furthermore, Jimmy's ghostly sonic presence suggests that the story is still very real to Weiss- she even cries "Look out, look out, look out, look out!" before Jimmy's crash, as if she is reliving the event.

In fact, Jimmy's death is so momentous that it changes the song's tonal world. As the sounds of the crash fade, we hear the same stark bass octaves that opened the song, but this time on Db's. Weiss sings her closing verse to the same melody as her opening hum, but transposed up to Db. For the first time, she shifts to the present tense, singing: "At school they all stop and stare/ I can't hide the tears but I don't care/ I'll never forget



him, the leader of the pack,” and confirming that her relationship with Jimmy and his death have deeply impacted her. In “Leader of the Pack,” both sonic and narrative devices emphasize Betty’s place as the protagonist of the song. Jimmy may have been Betty’s excuse to rebel, but he is characterized largely by his absence. What we hear instead is the story of Betty’s rebellion and its impact.

The orientation toward a post-rebellion future is a key part of rebel narratives in the Cold War. Male rebel stories commonly take the form of oedipal dramas centered around the rebel’s identity crisis and his struggle to define his own autonomy apart from his parents. These stories often involve chafing against stifling parental control, usually ending with a future that is positively transformed. As Medovoi writes, in these stories a “resolution takes place in which the bad boy will forego his rebelliousness if its cause is addressed” (Medovoi 2005, 214). When mapped onto an American national identity, these resolutions suggest a future point of reconciliation between capitalist conformity and democratic agency. In “Leader of the Pack,” the oedipal rebel narrative is recast with a girl rebel, and future resolution involves not only reconciliation between parent and child, but also loss. This story could be construed as a cautionary tale in which rebellion leads to disaster, however it is important to note that it is not the parents’ disapproval, but rather Betty’s decision to *obey* their command that causes Jimmy’s downfall. In this girl-rebel narrative, the reformation of the rebel is somewhat successful, but it also involves irreversible loss, revealing an alternative vision of a future in which capitalism and agency cannot be reconciled. Indeed, the song concludes with a fadeout of the repeated word “gone...” accompanied by the sound of motorcycle wheels skidding away. While Betty may be back in the fold, she will “never forget” the loss of Jimmy.

“I Can Never Go Home Anymore” (1965) also casts doubt on the possibility of true reconciliation between rebel and parent. This time, however, the parent ends up dead. Like “Leader of the Pack,” “I Can Never Go Home Anymore” contains large spoken sections recounting a past story and giving advice to another girl who is on the verge of rebelling. Mary Weiss sings lead, explaining how, after meeting a “miracle” boy, her mother tells her she’s too young to be with him and must break up with him. After packing her bags and running away with the boy, she found she “forgot that boy right away” but could not forget her home and her mother’s love.

Weiss’ longing for her mother features in the song’s pivotal bridge, which includes a lullaby sung by the whole ensemble. This section is marked by an abrupt textural shift as the rhythmic piano, guitars, and drums that underscored the song’s spoken portions give way to smooth, long-bowed strings and spare, metallic percussion. The girls sing the lullaby in unison; a departure from the vocal harmony that characterizes the rest of the song. Considerable reverb effects add a sense of distance to this ghostly vocal gesture. The lyrics of the lullaby, “Hush little baby, don’t you cry/ Mama won’t



go away...” underscore the sense of security Weiss remembers from her past at home with Mama, as the aural effect emphasizes a sense of temporal and geographical distance. Weiss’ voice then interrupts the lullaby with the emotional climax of the song: two cries of the word “Mama!” These two calls are particularly affecting; sung high in Weiss’ range in full chest register, they begin and end with a momentary vocal break and squeak- the famous “vocal ‘tear’” regularly employed by the likes of Hank Williams (Leppert and Lipsitz 1990, 265). Furthermore, these two cries are mixed to sound more distant, further emphasizing the space between mother and rebellious child. Weiss goes on to reveal the reason for her regret and sorrow. After she ran away, her mother “grew so lonely in the end/ the angels picked her for their friend.” Weiss’ calls go unanswered because her mother has died. She concludes with an explicit warning to other girls: don’t break your mama’s heart, because she won’t be there when you return.

In many ways, “I Can Never Go Home Anymore” is a classic example of the rebel tale: the youth grows discontented under her parents’ control and asserts her autonomy by leaving them. However, it is set apart by the parent’s death as a result of the child’s rebellion. The loss of Weiss’ mother is distinct from the loss of the ghostly Jimmy in “Leader of the Pack” in several ways. First, we do hear Mama’s “voice” through the ghostly lullaby figure, which allows us a brief glimpse of her side of the rebel story. Second, where Jimmy was a third-party auxiliary, Mama is part of the parent-child dyad at the center of most rebel narratives. While Jimmy’s death clearly had a lasting impact on Betty, Betty’s relationship with her parents was ultimately restored and her rebellion (at least partially) resolved. Mama’s death, however, decisively ends the possibility of future reconciliation. Too much rebellion, it seems, leaves permanent damage. While Lindner conceived of rebellion as a positive vehicle for societal change, in which the rebel’s defiance in the face of injustice eventually leads to resolution, the Shangri-Las suggest this might not be possible. In both “Leader of the Pack” and “I Can Never Go Home Anymore” songs, the rebel narratives are resolved only through the destruction of one of the characters. When situated in a Cold War imaginary, these songs gesture towards anxieties about the impact of rebellion and its potential for causing harm and loss. Ultimately, in refusing to reconcile the rebel and the parent, these songs challenge the feasibility of an autonomous democratic subject coexisting within a Fordist capitalist system.

The teenage rebel was a richly meaningful figure in American Cold War culture, when youthful rebellion featured prominently in national self-mythologizing and identity negotiation. However, most scholarship on the subject still focuses primarily on the rebellion of young men and boys. While musical rebels are often thought to be found primarily in rock, the Shangri-Las suggest that girl-group music is also a rich vein of Cold War rebel narratives. But recognizing them as such requires a commitment to



taking the voices of teenage girls seriously, even when they sing melodramatically about bad boyfriends. If we do so, we can uncover narratives that question the consequences of rebellion, the possibility of autonomy within capitalism, and the American Cold War imaginary itself.

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