

Rocking and Reasoning:  
Randall Auxier's Sharp Reflections on Rock Music, Philosophy and Life

Review of Randall Auxier's, *Metaphysical Graffiti: Deep Cuts in the Philosophy of Rock*  
(Chicago: Open Court, 2017), 396 pages.

"There's a certain type of song that only the virtuoso poet-songwriter can pull off," observes Randall Auxier.

It may even seem to be a genre in itself. Some examples everyone knows are Don McLean's "American Pie," Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," and of course Bruce Springsteen's "Blinded by the Light." ... I am speaking of completely over-the-top, testosterone-laden, swash-bucking wordsmithery that only a young man (or a man with a young Muse) would even dare to attempt. (200)

He compares this style or sub-genre to dithyramb, and names it "Ménage à Neuf," as it seems to be inspired by a liaison with all the muses. It is also a reasonably good description of the style of *Metaphysical Graffiti*, with its many voices – the rock soloist, the accomplished personal essayist, the deep-running metaphysician – and many subject-matters: improvisation, Alasdair Crowley, Ayn Rand, Arthur Danto, myth, aesthetic auto-destruction, Vico, property, Rousseau, prophecy, Peter Pan, fate, Richard Rorty, liberty, Cornel West, Donald Trump, performance, Adam Smith, time and imagination, Parrotheads, Abraham Joshua Heschel, deconstruction (defined beautifully as the view that "it is the uncontrollable surplus of meanings that eventually undermine our efforts to 'fix' the meaning of an artwork by using a point of reference, or an anchor, outside of the work." [239] He proceeds to deconstruct Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl.")

The ways we're writing philosophy today, and the range of things we're writing it about, seem awfully constricted, especially on the background of the wild variety of voices and texts of which philosophy consists, from the poetry of Parmenides or Lucretius to the aphorisms of Pascal or Nietzsche, Kierkegaard's "novels" or Sartre's plays. In *Metaphysical Graffiti*, Randall Auxier – a working rock musician as well as a philosopher — creates a way of writing philosophy that corresponds to his subject-matter: what we might call "classic rock," and in particular Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Neil Young, Paul Simon, Rush, Pink Floyd. The philosophy is responsible, and often runs deep. But the prose is loose, rollicking, improvisational. Auxier riffs or flows, shreds and soars. Or we might compare Auxier's style to the Beat poetry that was such an influence on Dylan and Simon, for example; *Metaphysical Graffiti* is to academic philosophy what *Howl* was to T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost. It might seem late for Beat Philosophy, but the stylistic development of philosophy has been so to speak, retarded.

Though I myself have mined popular culture for intellectual results for decades, I was a bit skeptical of Auxier's project initially, and the first few pages set off some alarm bells, as he lurched from a rich and rollicking characterization of rock 'n roll and a sharp discussion of the relationship between Mick Jagger and Keith Richards to this sentence: "There was a dude with the unfortunate name of Immanuel Kant.... Admittedly the guy is a little bit stuffy. Ok, he's a twit." (10-11) I was concerned that the music would end up being the almost-arbitrary hook on which to hang rudimentary or canned bits of intellectual history, and that the slangy tone might take on the quality of pandering. But that sentence and a few others of its ilk are fundamentally misleading, as Auxier develops fundamentally challenging and creative ways into the music, and out of the music back into philosophy, in a rare combination of erudition and direct engagement with material that many people already know. He makes use of an eclectic crew of historical figures and sophisticated original observations and arguments, in a way that ends up illuminating aesthetics, mythology, epistemology, ontology, and of course rock music. And if he argues that, for his generation (which is also mine) rock musicians were often our bards, prophets, or thinkers, he's obviously got a point, though I will admit that when it finally dawned on me that he was about to go deep into the ontology of Rush, I shivered with a kind of amused fear.

Auxier and I, I should reveal, have known each other for decades, and have argued about music occasionally the whole time. (There is a blurb by me on the back of the book, which makes me a bit of awkward choice as a reviewer, but here I am.) One of the things which directly impressed me about this book is that it convinced me in many ways even across these disagreements. I spent the 1970s (well before I knew Auxier) attacking Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, for example, even as everyone I knew seemed to worship them. I regard them as insanely overrated. Auxier's account of Paul Simon and Pink Floyd – acts I rather despised as a young man, or regarded as boring – almost forced me to listen again as I read. I found myself moved by the music, as I saw how deeply and articulately Auxier is moved by it, and I also found myself reassessing my teen opinions as he showed me deeper into the lyrics and the performance styles and biographies of the artists. I might have shivered when I reached the ontology of Rush toward the end, but I didn't want that bit or the book to be over, because he wrote about it so well, with so much personal engagement and also an underlying systematic philosophy – owing much to figures such as Whitehead and Susanne Langer, on whom Auxier is one of the world's top experts.

By the same token, the whole thing brought me back to the era of boys arguing about music, and you can mine this book for classic argument starters such as "Five Greatest Bands in Rock History." Auxier makes them Stones, Beatles, Who, Zeppelin, Floyd. If you can resist replying with your own roster, you are a better boy than I am. I'm going to make it Stones, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Allman Brothers, Ramones, Pretenders. As I lived through the era, I was always looking for the move back to basics, whereas Auxier was looking for the expansion into art and poetry.

This book, I finally came to see as I neared its end, is brilliant, and it's extremely bold and ambitious stylistically and philosophically, ambitious as the early albums of Springsteen. He finds an equivalent in philosophical prose of the music he's celebrating, and he does this by weaving lyrics in and out of many sentences, but also by performing, strutting like Jagger or Prince, then calming down for a couple of sensitive acoustic numbers. You have to let it wash over you for awhile, give him this or that digression in the faith that it all weaves together, or in allowance for the fact that he is trying all sorts of things, and trying, in particular, to break the writing of philosophy wide open. And rather shockingly, by the end, you are left with the impression not of a grab-bag of styles, observations, songs, riffs, but something more like a system of rock philosophy. It's hard to convey the overall impression in a review, but Auxier is also a fine maker of aphorisms, and I'd like to close by drawing attention to some of my favorites.

To organize energies you have to constrain them for a moment, to store up some excess, to hold that excess (against its natural tendency to flow out and diffuse itself into moments of pure enduring), and then release it again in little bursts of suffering life. To rock and roll is to release that pent-up power in tiny explosions, between sixty and a hundred sixty times per minute, in groups of four. (27)

Nietzsche was right when he complained that Christianity is a puny slave morality that renders the human race effeminate and opposes all that is mighty and virile in humans. That's exactly what I *like* about Christianity. I have always thought that slaves know more than their masters, and that overweening masculinity needs to be opposed with as much vigor as it takes to keep the boys from killing each other with their stupid pointy toys. (65)

When we recognize that we can re-vitalize the will of the dead, we also realize that we cannot be certain that the natural features of our world are not symbols too, living manifestations of the will of some other being whose language and symbols are difficult for us to recognize. (108)

If I were a soldier, I think I might choose Pink Floyd for battle if I wanted help in letting myself be killed. (145)

God knows what it's like to be you, and everybody else, but God doesn't know what it's like to be just you, and nobody else. (177)

Sometimes, unexpectedly, we see straight through the mundane and into the pure existence of the possibilities that surround it. Somehow, the moment vanishes and its pure being is just there, empty of all you thought it was, but full of nothing else. It isn't exactly a revelation, or an epiphany, or a visitation. It's an aperture, the arrival of the already. Or something like that. (257)

I don't really want to do all the hard work required to be a genuinely excellent person, so Aristotle does me no good.... I want to be selectively moral, and I also want the favor of good fortune to make the difference between my vices and their natural consequences. In short, I don't want either justice or mercy – I don't deserve the latter and can't bear the former; I want to escape the natural order by just enough to enjoy my favorite toys, keep my vices, and die in my sleep. (319–320)

The poet type wants artistic intensity in his relation to his audience, he wants to share his art more than his feelings, so his feelings get all arted up. (327)

And here is the secret truth that has led musicians to poverty since the first Cro-Magnon drum circles: *We* would do it for free, but we feel *you* ought to pay us for it. Because *you* love it. It makes you feel good. It makes you sad when you want to be sad. It adds meaning and poignancy to your life and your memories, and you can't observe any important moment without us... We play the national anthem, and the fight song, and we play the hymns, and we play reveille and charge and beat retreat, and the wedding song, and we made that woman fall in love with you and we made that man remember you with tenderness, and you should fucking *appreciate* that. (355)