

Rock For Sale...

writing a song. Start worrying about the ultimate effect of all your actions, and in the end you just have to say fuck it. Everybody in the world is getting fucked one way or another. All you can do is see that you aren't fucking them directly."

But the Airplane also profess political radicalism, and, says Kantner, "The revolution is already happening, man. All those kids dropping out, turning on — they add up." Singer Grace Slick appeared in blackface on the Smothers Brothers show and gave the Black Panther salute; in a front window of their mansion is a sign that reads, "Eldridge Cleaver Welcome Here." But Kantner said he hadn't really thought about what that meant: would he really take Cleaver in and protect him against police attack, a very likely necessity should Cleaver accept the welcome? "I don't know, man. I'd have to wait until that happened."

Cleaver would be well-advised not to choose the Airplane's mansion for his refuge. For Kantner's mushy politics — sort of a turned-on liberalism that thinks the Panthers are "groovy" but doesn't like to come to terms with the nasty American reality — are the politics of the much touted "rock revolution." They add up to a hazy belief in the power of art to change the world, presuming that the place for revolution to begin and end is inside individual heads. The Beatles said it nicely in "Revolution": "You say that it's the institution, we'll, you know, you better free your mind instead."

Jac Holzman, president of Elektra Records, said it in businessman's prose: "I want to make it clear," he said, "that Elektra is not the tool of anyone's revolution. We feel that the 'revolution' will be won by poetics and not by politics — that poetics will change the structure of the world. It's reached the kids and is getting to them at the best possible level."

There is no secret boardroom conspiracy to divert antisocial youthful energy into rock and thus render it harmless while making a profit for the society it is rebelling against, but the corporate system has acted in that direction with a uniformity which a conspiracy probably could not have provided. And the aware capitalists are worried about their ability to control where kids are going: "There is something a bit spooky, from a business point of view," a Fortune issue on youth said recently, "... in youth's widespread rejection of middle-class life-styles ('Cheap is in')... If it... becomes a dominant orientation, will these children of affluence grow up to be consumers on quite the economy moving scale as their parents?"

So the kids are talking revolution and smoking dope? Well, so are the companies, in massive advertising campaigns that co-opt the language of revolution so thoroughly that you'd think they were on the streets themselves. "The Man can't bust our music," read one Columbia ad; another urged (with a picture of a diverse group of kids apparently turning on): "Know who your friends are. And look and see and touch and be together. Then listen. We do."

More insidious than the ads themselves is the fact that as money from the record companies is one of the main supports of the underground press. And the companies don't mind supporting these "revolutionary" sheets; the failure of Hearst's Eye magazine after a year showed that the establishment itself could not create new media to reach the kids, so squeamish is it about advocating revolution, drugs and sexual liberation. But it is glad to support the media the kids create themselves, and thereby, just as it did with rock, ultimately defang it.

The ramifications of control finally came full circle when Rolling Stone, the leading national rock newspaper, which began 18 months ago on a shoestring, had enough money in the bank to afford a \$7000 ad on the back page of the New York Times. Not only was this "hip rock" publication selfconsciously taking its place among the communication giants ("NBC was the day before us and Look the day af-



ter," said the twenty-two-year-old editor), but the ad's copy made clear the paper's exploitive aim: "If you are a corporate executive trying to understand what is happening to youth today, you cannot afford to be without Rolling Stone. If you are a student professor, a parent, this is your life because you already know that rock and roll is more than just music; it is the energy center of the new culture and youth revolution." Such a neat reversal of the corporate-to-kids lie into a kids-to-corporate lie is only possible when the kids so believe the lie they have been fed that they want to pass it on.

But rock and roll musicians are in the end artists and entertainers, and were it not for all the talk of the "rock revolution," one would not be led to expect a clear political vision from them. The bitterest irony is that the "rock revolution" hype has come close to fatally limiting the revolutionary potential that rock does contain. So effective has the rock industry been in encouraging the spirit of optimistic youth take-over that rock's truly hard political edge, its constant exploration of the varieties of youthful frustration, has been ignored and softened. Rock musicians, like their followers, have always been torn between the obvious pleasures that America held out and the price paid for them. Rock and roll is not revolutionary music because it has never gotten beyond articulation of this paradox. At best it has offered the defiance of withdrawal; its violence never amounted to more than a cry of "Don't bother me."

"Leave me alone; anyway, I'm almost grown"; "Don't step on my blue suede shoes"; "There ain't no cure for the summertime blues"; "I can't get no satisfaction": the rock refrains that express despair could be strung out forever. But at least rock has offered an honest appraisal of where its makers and listeners are at, and that radical, if bitterly defeatist, honesty is a touchstone, a starting point. If the companies, as representatives of the corporate structure, can convince the rock world that their revolution is won or almost won, that the walls of the playground are crumbling, not only will the constituents of rock seal their fate by that fatal self-deception, but their music, one of the few things they actually do have going for them, will have been successfully corrupted and truly emasculated.

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