

ROCK MUSIC, SUICIDE AND MEDIA INFLUENCE

Abstract: *Suicide risk factors usually include: previous attempts, depression, comorbidity of alcohol consumption and drug abuse, gender (three to four times more suicides in men than in women), family history of psychiatric disorders, environmental and social factors such as periods of major social changes or movements: revolution, industrialization, secularization, migration, wars and the like. In this paper we should try to approach the problem by looking into the hypothesis of some researchers that rock music, or rock and hippie movements from the 60s to the end of the 80s of the 20th century, are included in these social risk factors, directly or indirectly. The arguments that the authors refer to are mainly: numerous suicides among both performers and listeners of rock music, many cases of emulated suicides of rock stars by fans, a large number of songs whose content speaks of suicide, evidence on the spot of suicide related to listening to such songs at the time of committing suicide, many lawsuits and trials against rock composers and performers by grieving relatives, etc. The aim of this paper is to analyze critically these facts as problematic for stating them as causes of suicide. Additionally, the paper aims to explain that for already predisposed, latent suicidal people, this type of music is only a mediator towards more intense socializing with similar listeners, indulging in latent suicide activities such as alcohol consumption and drug abuse and only subsequently to depression and suicide. Since suicide does not have to be associated with depression and the death drive, but on the contrary with the urge to live and the desire to be prominent, loved and remembered, the thesis that suicides of rock artists and supporters belong to this category should not be removed.*

Key words: *social movements, suicide, rock artists, life drive, death urge.*

1. Suicidality and Suicide

People are quite prone to self-harming themselves, risk-taking, self-punishment, bad habits, unhealthy life, exaggeration, etc. It could be said that most of us, every day, do something to our detriment. However, special attention has always been paid to suicide (Fajgelj, 2014). Probably because it has always *smelled of pathology* to experts, but also to the laymen, regardless of a large number of prominent, famous or ingenious people who ended their lives committing it.

In contrast, a person who ended his life earlier because of intensive smoking, eating, drinking, excitement to a great extent, as well as adrenaline and risky behaviors does not attract special attention. There is no impression that a person killed himself

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intentionally, although it is obvious that the mentioned activities are risk factors for premature death. Experts quite agree (Hawton, Casanas, Comabella, Haw and Saunders. 2013) that this is not a direct suicide, but a famous notion of *latent suicide*.

All people prone to suicide can be classified into numerous categories according to different criteria (children, adults, men, women, race, religion, rich or poor, etc.). However, statistics show that there are differences with regard to various categories of people. Unfortunately, these differences are unstable and temporally and spatially short-lived. In a certain period or place on Earth, the difference in favor of one category changes and often turns into another or opposite.

It is estimated that about a million people in the world commit suicide yearly (Fajgelj, 2014; Kecmanović, 1986), or ten to fifteen on 100,000 inhabitants. In Serbia, about 1,500 to 2,000 people commit suicide annually, which ranks it among the top 20 countries in the world. Half of that happens in Vojvodina, which represents an average of one suicide every 17 hours in that region.

On average, men kill themselves three to three and a half times more often than women. According to available data, about 90% of people committing suicide have some mental disorder, with depression being the most common (50 to 75%) (Berger, 1997; Hawton et al., 2013). A meta-analysis of several papers published between 1970 and 2012 found the following potential risk factors: previous suicide attempts, severe depression, hopelessness, comorbidity of alcohol and drug abuse, gender (men), anxiety and family history of psychiatric disorders (Hawton et al., 2013).

There is an evidence that suicides also depend on *environmental conditions*, especially on the social situation at a particular historical moment or period: industrialization, urbanization, nation education, secularization, social and marital integration, age, religion, migration, political conditions (e.g., war, revolution, change of government, democratization) and the like (Berger, 1997; Hawton et al., 2013). Many of these factors, of course, are not direct causes of suicide, but are an intervening or moderating variable. For example: divorce or exile (migration) may be associated with suicide, subsequently creating depression and hopelessness in those already exposed, which is then indirectly associated with suicide (Stack, 2000). Such social situations that marked certain historical moments or periods of humanity can include the hippie movement of the '60s and '70s of the 20th century, rock music of the '70s and '80s and techno and electronic music of the '90s. The main goal of this paper is to try to consider rock music as a potential suicide factor, especially among young people - fans, but also with performers among whom there were numerous highly popular world stars (see Table 1).

Freud believed that the urge for self-destruction was an attack on a beloved one with whom the individual identified, so that suicide, at least in part, had the meaning of homicide, an act of aggression against another person (Kecmanović, 1986). In the dubiousness of the analysis and our inability to figure out the motives for the rock artists' and fans' self-destruction, this hypothesis should not be ignored, because in the lyrics of rock songs there were often verses about the suicidal intention of a lover because of a beloved one, whether it sounded serious or just pathetic (or

poetic). Especially, when we have in mind some theses of psychoanalytic theory, that aggression was considered a perverted sexual urge or reaction to frustration, and Freud later, after introducing the concept of death instinct (drive), saw in suicide the embodiment of this instinct, which was a kind of opposite to another basic instinct: the instinct of life, the instinct of preserving living matter (Kecmanović, 1986). The study of suicidal fantasies, dreams in which the motive of suicide appeared, showed that suicide did not always have to express the urge to destroy one's own being, the negation of one's existence, but could reflect the desire to confirm one's personality and life in general, to be in the function of affirming the instinct of life. In fantasies, suicide was often a means of forcing others to express love for us after our death (many did not avoid the fantasy of imagining their own funeral - how many people would come, who would cry...), that is, to convince us of our vitality and importance (Stengel, 1960).

Could such a suicidal desire be understood not as a desire for self-destruction, but as a desire to reach Nirvana (perhaps it was not by chance that Cobain's group was called *Nirvana*), to erase the boundary between life and death? According to this theory (Kecmanović, 1986), a suicide attempt could be an attempt on self-continuation, not self-destruction, a fantasy of satisfying the need for immortality. Since it represents an act of destruction of natural death as an objective inevitability, the self-chosen way of leaving this world could have the meaning of omnipotence, the triumph of a subject over an object, free will over natural necessity. Anyone who knows the characteristics of rock artists, rock music and rock movements will agree that their rebellion, ideology and philosophy of life in general are often an important factor of suicidal risk. Thus, according to this hypothesis, individual motives for suicide are always ambiguous, they contain affirmation and negation, the need for destruction and the need for preservation, a desperate attempt to appeal for help, but also a proud decision *to leave without turning* (Kecmanović, 1986), which can be recognized in rock ideology.

Basically, suicide is the result of several factors which are often connected in the way that is neither simple nor one-sided, but the interactions are sometimes unusual and difficult to grasp. It often seems that every suicide is a story in itself, but there are also regularities and laws that we have mentioned. Despite the impression that a person wants to end his life on his own, it does not have to be this way: some suicides are really planned, but there are strong facts stating that the decision was often made impetuously and the person acted on an irresistible impulse, with the impression that the man could have been prevented from committing that act, if only there was someone nearby to react. Even if it was planned, the decision was probably made in a state of suffering and disorder, in solitude, with no apparent way out at the moment. That is why the dilemma remained whether the suicide really meant that a person wanted to die (Fajgelj, 2014; Kecmanović, 1986).

2. Rock Music

Rock is a genre of popular music that developed during the 1960s in England and America (Studwell & Lonergan, 1999). The roots came from rock-and-roll of the '40s and '50s, which was influenced by rhythm and blues and country music. Rock music was also influenced by numerous genres such as blues, folk, jazz and classical music (Abbey, 2006; Ammer, 2004; Covach, 2006; Curtis, 1987).

Rock music served as a medium for social and cultural movements, creating many subcultures, such as *rockers* in the UK, and *hippies* in the US. During the '70s, punk culture emerged, from which *emo* and *goth* subcultures later appeared. Inheriting the folk tradition of protest songs, rock music was associated with political activism as well as change of social attitudes toward race, gender and drug use, and was often seen as an expression of youthful revolt against consumerism and adult authority (Frith, 2007; McDonald, 2009; Wicke, 1990).

Unlike many earlier styles of popular music, the themes of rock songs were very wide. For rock musicians the world was that out of space light that anyone should gravitate to and the absolute truth was the truth contained in one moment (Cvetanović, 2012). Thus, in the lyrics of rock songs, there were society, unrequited love, sex, rebellion against the government, sports, drinks, drugs, money and social issues (Ammer, 2004). Some of these themes were inherited from rock performers of older pop, jazz and blues while other themes first appeared in the lyrics. Some called rock music a *cool medium* with simple diction and refrain repetition (Campbell, 2004; Kent, 1983; Robinson, 1972; Shepherd, 2003).

Rock music was declared to have a significant and negative influence on young people, which was manifested in several ways (Farber, 2007; Szatmary, 1996). It referred to the personification of delinquency, promiscuity, immorality, but it also appeared to encourage and promote suicide. Between 1980 and 1995, the number of suicides doubled among people aged 10 to 14! By the end of 1987, suicide had become the second leading cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 and 18, after car accidents. By the end of the '90s, suicide *fell* to the third place as the cause of death in this young population, but only because the second place was taken by mutual murders (Stack, 2000).

3. Suicidal Lyrics of Rock Music Songs

Many rock songs (Farber, 2007) glorify suicide: *Death Can Be Fun* (*Kamikaze Klones*), *Consider Me Gone* - a Sting's song about a desperate man who had nothing else to look forward to except death, *Die Young*, *Stay Young* - with this song, the group *Blondie* seemed to encourage young people to die before old age takes away their beauty, *No Way Out* (*D Generation*), talked about the desire to commit suicide, etc. Marilyn Manson sold T-shirts with the slogan *Kill God, Kill Your Parents, Kill Yourself* (Alternative Press, February 1997).

Some rock bands even mentioned suicide as an act in their name, like the band *Suicidal Tendencies*. The text of one of their songs called *Suicidal Failure* reads: “I don’t want to live / I don’t know why / It’s not that I don’t have a reason / I just want to die.” The song *Suicide’s an Alternative* said: “I’m tired of life, I’m tired, I don’t care, I’m sick of myself, I don’t want to live, I’m sick of life, I’m going to die, suicide is an option!” The song of the group *Police* also talked about suicide, “I can’t see the point in another day / for nobody listens to a word I say / You can call it lack of confidence / but to carry on living doesn’t make no sense / ... You’ll be sorry when I’m dead / all this guilt will be on your head / I guess you call it suicide / but I’m too full to swallow my pride.” Between 1985 and 1990, three lawsuits were filed against Ozzie Osborne by three groups of parents who claimed that the song *Suicide Solution* caused their sons to commit suicide. Osborne was acquitted, claiming that the song was written as a lament on the occasion of the death of the rock star Bon Scott, and that the song itself was actually against alcohol and suicide³. The judge declared that the text of the song was protected by the First Amendment and that rock musicians had the right to *artistic freedom*.

The text of the song *Paranoid* by the group *Black Sabbath* sung by Osborne read: “Think I’ll lose my mind, if I don’t find something to gratify, can you help me? Oh, won’t you blow my brains?” Two other songs by the same group called *Killing Yourself to Live* and *Die Young* mentioned dark suicidal thoughts as well. David Bowie’s song *Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide* directly mentioned suicide, but in it we also had arguments for the hypothesis of the instinct of life, popularity and eternity as suicide goals, not death, because in the finale and refrain there was optimism and affirmation of life “Oh no, love! You’re not alone”.

4. Suicides of Rock Music Supporters and Performers

Two young men from the USA committed suicide in 1987 with a shotgun in a car parked in front of the church. After hours of listening to Judas Priest’s *Stained Class* album, they agreed to kill themselves. The parents sued the music group, stating that the lyrics in combination with a *psychedelic, depressing, and evil melody hypnotize and brain youth and convince them that death is the solution to life*. Their lawyer claimed that the suggestive text of the song with repetitive rhythmic patterns and phrases without changing the intonation, caused and encouraged suicide⁴, but the judges ignored such a thesis (Shuker, 2005).

There were many more suicides of young people who had listened to this type of music. However, in addition to listeners, suicide was one of the leading causes of death among rock musicians, among whom there were mega-popular: 1) Christopher Acland of *Lush* committed suicide in 1996 by hanging, aged 30; 2) Two members

³ <https://www.biblebelievers.com/RockDeaths.html>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/14/joy-division-ian-curtis-suicide>

of the British rock band *Badfinger*: Pete Ham, the leader and lyricist of the group, hanged himself in 1975 a few days before his 28th birthday; 3) The band's guitarist, Tony Evans, also hanged himself, at the age of 36; 4) Chester Bennington, frontman of the *Linkin Park*, hanged himself 2017 at the age of 41; 5) Kurt Cobain, a 27-year-old frontman of the *Nirvana* group, shot himself in the head with a shotgun in a room above his garage in April 1994. His body was found three days later. Rolling Stone magazine reported that at least 68 persons committed something called *copycat suicide*, i.e., they copied his suicide. *Nirvana's* album *Nevermind*, which sold ten million copies, promoted the idea that nothing mattered, that there was no meaning to life. One of the songs was called *I Hate Myself, I Want to Die*; 5) Ian Curtis, frontman of *Joy Division* group, hanged himself in 1980 at the age of 25, at the height of his fame. While committing suicide, he was listening to his favorite Iggy Pop album, *The Idiot*; 6) Keith Flint, vocalist of the group *The Prodigy*, killed himself in 2019 at the age of 49; 5) Yogi Horton, the drummer of Luther Vandross and many other artists, killed himself in 1987 at the age of 37 by jumping from the 17th floor of a hotel in New York. After that, several more people jumped from the same floor of the same hotel; 7) Jonghyun, Korean pop superstar killed himself in December 2017 at the age of 27.

The connection between premature death and rock music seems to be undeniable, but causal statements should not be made. Such music did not directly affect these musicians to take their own lives, and we could only guess the real reasons. Perhaps the difficult, traumatic life of the authors led to the creation of such music, and drugs and alcohol were frequent mediators not only towards death, but also towards the creation and freer performance of songs (getting rid of stage fright).

Heavy metal, which did not belong to the rock-and-roll direction at the time, takes the lead as the culprit when it comes to suicides (Weinstein, 1991). Conservatives in the United States considered this music sexist, arrogant, satanic, drug-addicted, which, among other things, influenced the behavior of teenagers and promoted suicide. Heavy metal music was criticized as violent, hedonistic, containing sexist lyrics as well as loud guitars, too strong bass guitar and overall, too loud sound (Weinstein, 1991). It was music that attracted a certain part of the youth who identified with aggression and rebellion. By the 1980s, many wore satanic symbols, and alcohol and drug use seemed to be implied by most *heavy metal players*. For some, this was a sect, and this music was a call for socially unacceptable behavior and even suicide. For *metal* lovers, however, this music was simply an escape from reality or one of the ways to *annoy parents*.

The table below provides an overview of some suicides and latent suicides of rock artists and performers (from the almost endless list, only the most famous names of rock artists or rock bands have been singled out, at least for rock connoisseurs).

Table 1. *Part of the overview of suicides and latent suicides of rock creators and performers*

Name	Last Name	Band	Date of death	Age	Cause
John	Bonham	Led Zeppelin	80-09-25	32	Alcohol
Steve	Clark	Def Leppard	91-01-08	30	Alcohol
Rory	Gallagher	Taste	95-06-14	46	Alcohol
Bill	Haley		81-02-09	56	Alcohol
Ron 'Pigpen'	McKernan	Grateful Dead	73-03-08	27	Alcohol
John	Panozzo	Styx	96-07-16	47	Alcohol
Bon	Scott	AC/DC	80-02-19	33	Alcohol
Tommy	Bolin	Deep Purple	76-12-04	25	Drugs
Brian	Cole	Association	72-08-02	28	Drugs
Pete	Farndon	Pretenders	83-04-14	30	Drugs
Dwayne	Goettel	Skinny Puppy	95-08-23	31	Drugs
Jimi	Hendrix		70-09-18	27	Drugs
James	Honeyman-Scott	Pretenders	82-06-16	25	Drugs
Shannon	Hoon	Blind Melon	95-10-21	28	Drugs
Janis	Joplin		70-10-04	27	Drugs
Robbie	McIntosh	Average White Band	74-09-23	23	Drugs
Keith	Moon	Who	78-09-07	32	Drugs
Bill	Murcia	New York Dolls	72-11-06	21	Drugs
Kristen	Pfaff	Hole	94-06-16	24	Drugs
David	Ruffin	Temptations	91-06-01	50	Drugs
Stefanie	Sargent	7 Year Bitch	92-06-27	24	Drugs
Bob	Stinson	Replacements	95-02-20	35	Drugs
Vinnie	Taylor	Sha Na Na	74-04-17	25	Drugs
Gary	Thain	Uriah Heep	76-03-19	27	Drugs
Johnny	Thunders	New York Dolls	91-04-23	38	Drugs
Sid	Vicious	Sex Pistols	79-02-02	21	Drugs
Danny	Whitten	Crazy Horse	72-11-18	29	Drugs
Andrew	Wood	Mother Love Bone	90-03-19	24	Drugs
Nick	Acland	Lush	96-10-17	30	Suicide
Bobby	Bloom		74-02-28	28	Suicide

Roy	Buchanan		88-08-14	48	Suicide
Kurt	Cobain	Nirvana	94-04-05	27	Suicide
Vincent	Crane	Atomic Rooster	89-02-01	44	Suicide
Ian	Curtis	Joy Division	80-05-18	23	Suicide
Nick	Drake		74-11-25	26	Suicide
Tom	Evans	Badfinger	83-11-18	36	Suicide
Danny	Gatton	(session musician)	94-10-04	49	Suicide
Pete	Ham	Badfinger	75-04-23	28	Suicide
Michael	Hutchence	INXS	97-11-21	37	Suicide
Phyllis	Hyman		95-07-03	44	Suicide
Billy	Mackenzie	Associates	97-01-23	39	Suicide
Richard	Manual	The Band	86-03-04	42	Suicide
Phil	Ochs		76-04-07	35	Suicide
Ingo	Schwichtenberg	Halloween	95-03-08	29	Suicide
Del	Shannon		90-02-08	51	Suicide
Rory	Storm	Rory Storm and the Hurricanes	72-09-27	32	Suicide
Biggie	Tembo	Bhundu Boys	95-08-13	37	Suicide
Paul	Williams	Temptations	73-08-17	34	Suicide
Al	Wilson	Canned Heat	70-09-03	27	Suicide

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Do listeners decide to commit suicide because of the music they listen to, or does that music have such a strong influence on someone's will? There is a connection between rock music and suicide, but it is more likely in the opposite direction: the individual state of the artist (creator) affects his product, in this case music. Listeners of his music become his supporters and fans because they can empathize with him through his work and find understanding and comfort in an artist who has gone through the same or a similar situation. The fact is that rock music has a large audience and that the messages that music sends both through the lyrics and the music are not simple and certainly often come from some *dark* place, that is, some bad or traumatic experience. It is precisely these experiences that are perhaps the source of this kind of art in the form of lyrics and songs and serve their creators, among other things, not only as a means of expression, but also as a kind of self-therapy.

However, the very nature of music, even with implicit lyrics, is not enough to lead someone to such an act. The influence of such music lies in the identification with its content and message. If the listener somehow *finds himself* in a certain song or shares the experience and similarities with the one who wrote that song, and in addition to it, he also cultivates emotion towards it (which is a common case, listeners are fans of their heroes on the rock scene, keeping in mind that worship is often confounded with envy, which further complicates the potential unfolding and explanation), then one can expect processes of imitation and identification with the performer, but also the actors in the text of the song.

Broadly speaking, perhaps socio-psychologically, the pronounced conservatism that the United States aspired to in those years and decades brought prosperity and economic power to the country. However, with that other difficulties arise. If the system is generally functioning properly, and there is no external *target* to which the revolt will be directed, then that revolt may be coming back like a boomerang. The ability to express dissatisfaction of any origin is the privilege of a rich society. Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of suicides is drastically higher in such societies and countries (Stack, 2000). Poor countries do not have, or have a very small percentage of, suicide deaths.

In any environment, regardless of state and nationality, teenagers, especially during puberty, tend to defy and oppose their parents and older people, people with authority in general. In that sense, rock-and-roll and the way of life that music propagates are an ideal means *to irritate parents*. The lyrics of the song, which often call for the violation of moral and ethical values, and even for the violation of the law, are in absolute contradiction with what conservatism represents.

As it is in human nature to explain and end something, it is also natural to be afraid of the inexplicable and incomprehensible. The very fact that a large number of young people have decided to end their lives causes discomfort and fear, and that fear is further increased when there is no legitimate explanation and reason for all these situations. A suitable culprit for suicides was found, and the characteristics of that musical genre were presented as a sufficient reason for such behaviour of a good part of the youth of a given period. Above all, we must accept the claim that suicide cannot be attributed to a single cause. Listening to a certain type of music or belonging to a group related to it does not make that music any more to blame for suicides than the influence of television, movies, video games, books (was the suicide of Hemingway, Yesenin, Miljković or Čopić to blame for youth suicides!?). Although all of these forms of influence can pose a kind of risk when it comes to a sensitive, vulnerable person, a complex approach is needed that will take into account all individual psychological elements to assess whether a particular person is prone to suicide or not.

What leads a person to suicidal thoughts is very complex. This decision can be influenced by external factors and the environment, but not only by external factors. Fans of rock-and-roll music and art in general with similar content are fans of that art because they find themselves in it. This does not mean that all people who like to listen to rock-and-roll are prone to suicide, but perhaps that people who have such thoughts are more inclined to choose some *psychedelic* music (elaboration of the intervening moderator variable in correlation: *explanation*).

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ROK MUZIKA, SAMOUBISTVO I EFEKAT MEDIJA

Sažetak: *Kao faktori suicida obično se navode: prethodni pokušaji, depresija, komorbiditet somatskih i psihičkih oboljenja, zloupotreba alkohola i droga, pol (kod muškaraca tri do četiri puta više suicida nego kod žena), anksioznost, porodična istorija psihijatrijskih poremećaja, zatim sredinski i društveni faktori, kao što su periodi većih društvenih promena ili pokreta: revolucija, industrijalizacija, sekularizacija, migracije, ratovi i slično. Mnogi od ovih nisu direktni faktori, već medijatori, tj. kod već predisponiranih osoba mogu dovesti do depresije, koja zatim može biti uzrok samoubistva. Problem ovog rada sadrži se u analizi hipoteze nekih istraživača da se i rok muzika, ili rok i hipi-pokret od 60-ih do kraja 80-ih godina 20.veka, svrsta u ove društvene faktore rizika, direktne ili indirektno. Argumenti na koje se autori pozivaju uglavnom su: veliki broj suicida i kod izvođača i kod slušalaca rok muzike, mnogo slučajeva imitiranih suicida rok zvezda od strane obožavalaca, veliki broj pesama čiji sadržaj govori o suicidu, dokazi na licu mesta suicida o slušanju tih pesama upravo u trenutku izvršenja, mnogo tužbi i sudskih procesa protiv rok stvaralaca i izvođača od strane ožalošćene rodbine itd. Cilj rada je kritička analiza navedenih činjenica kao problematičnih za tvrdnju o njima kao uzrocima suicida i pokušaj objašnjenja da je verovatno ta vrsta muzike kod već predisponiranih, latentnih samoubica samo medijator ili facilitator ka intenzivnijem druženju sa sebi sličnim, te prepuštanju aktivnostima latentnog samoubistva kao što je konzumiranje alkohola i droge, pa tek onda ka depresiji i samoubistvu. S obzirom na to da pak suicid ne mora biti povezan sa depresijom i nagonom smrti, već naprotiv i sa nagonom života i željom da se bude istaknut, voljen i upamćen, ne bi trebalo odstraniti tezu da samoubistva rokera pripadaju ovoj kategoriji.*

Ključne reči: *društveni pokreti, suicid, rokeri, nagon života, nagon smrti.*