LOVE, LISTS, AND CLASS IN NICK HORNBY’S HIGH FIDELITY

Nick Hornby’s High Fidelity (1995) is a comic romance, a male bildungsroman detailing the ups and downs of a relationship between Rob Fleming, a record-store owner, and Laura, his longstanding girlfriend, who has just entered the legal profession. Rob’s main product, vinyl LPs, is a residual pop commodity, and, not coincidentally, his store, Championship Vinyl, does meager business. His two employees, Dick and Barry, are socially maladroit music obsessives and supreme culture snobs. Rob’s relationship with Laura collapses as the novel commences; the breakup drives Rob into a reverie that fuels the narrative, an introspective interrogation of career choices and romantic failures. Rob and Laura face obstacles generated in part by Rob’s overwhelming personal and professional investment in rock music. His latest love crisis with Laura resolves itself not through marriage vows, but by Laura’s moves to meet Rob on the ground of his own profession. She encourages the passive record store listener to rejoin the community, to return to his previous work as club DJ.

All along the way, Rob’s internal monologue summarizes and evaluates his past. His constant exhumation of his romantic biography cannot be separated from his connoisseurship of rock. Rob’s experiences, both erotic and audio, social and private, become filtered and ordered through a grid familiar to the pop fanatic: the top-five list.

In High Fidelity, knowledge of the popular and pop self-referencing achieves something like the status of an autonomous character. Rob’s lists summon forth a complex, sophisticated, and arcane world of rock appreciation replete with touchstones for fans and listeners. More generally, it would seem that lists orient fan subjectivity in the process of articulating it. The results are exemplified by Rob’s incessant, lacerating self-analysis and rendered most succinctly by the chicken-egg
question asked early in the novel—“which came first, the music or the misery?” (25). Clearly, rock appreciation is demanding and melancholy work, which serves to isolate its adepts from an untutored mass. Thus formulated, the popular can then be wielded as a weapon in the distinctly late-modern class war: it empowers by shaming and excluding the novice.

Rarely has the world of the male pop fanatic found such a beguiling expressive form. The book proffers the voyeuristic charm of getting to know male psychology at its most asocial, while avoiding connotations of psychosis, a procedure made all the more seductive by the high-energy cinematic adaptation directed by Stephen Frears and co-written by the film’s leading man, John Cusak. *High Fidelity* participates in the archivist, curatorial moment of rock’s middle age—a reactive, conservative codification of rock into something to rank, evaluate, and historicize. By means of a disarming, romantically dysfunctional, but well-intentioned and maturing white male, both the film and book cycled this conceptually esoteric moment into the popular mainstream.

Without addressing the subject of rock music, Raymond Williams’s essay, “Culture and Technology,” nevertheless describes the forces underlying its current use, as well as the process of rock’s literary appropriation.1 Canonical literature is inevitably a cultural residue, shaped by the past and tangled in older forms of social hegemony. However, in a social order where the monied classes must obey “the imperatives of a harsher phase of the capitalist economy,” an increasingly marginalized canonical culture is forced to fend for itself (125). Yet intellectuals hungry for status still police the borders of taste. Increasingly, they come to draw lines, not merely between high and low culture, but between a popular culture suitable for exclusive use and the “merely” popular. For this intellectual class, the memory of a social order where culture was the exclusive possession of a privileged few still remains.

The predicament of Rob Fleming in *High Fidelity* suggests other reasons for the abjection of the popular in our current historical moment. If rock culture now prefers formula moves to risk taking, the ability of partisans to draw lines between assembly-line product and something different becomes a positive asset. In an age of commodity rock, the knowledge of what signifies in music beyond the merely
commercial becomes a marketable skill. In *High Fidelity*, this skill provides those in the know with clear dividends in social, if not actual, capital; it also disenfranchises those incapable or indifferent to the distinctions among cultural products.

I contend that the specific class orientation of the middle-class professional lurks behind this manifestation of the literary popular. The popular as imagined by Hornby suggests both a deep participation in and a self-authorizing critical distance from mass culture. *High Fidelity*’s narrative form rushes toward a magical closure in which a conservative version of the popular, honoring the imperatives of the connoisseur, freezes out emerging, progressive possibilities.

**MAN TROUBLE**

The specific problem animating Hornby’s fictional output is the redemption of the male specialist in popular entertainment; these novels serve to compensate for the lack of status of these male experts relative to their roles as tastemakers and symbol managers. How might such dysfunctional men hook up with the right women to reproduce, in every sense of the word, their class? Crude as it may sound, this question organizes Hornby’s autobiographical account of soccer fandom, *Fever Pitch*, and accounts for the shape the narrative assumed when Hornby adapted the story for film. The book is part self and part social analysis; as screenplay writer, Hornby reorganized his ruminative, speculative text around a story of troubled romance. Paul, the young teacher who serves as the film’s protagonist, has a deep attachment to soccer that threatens his burgeoning relationship with Sarah, another teacher (and crucially, an aspiring professional). The imperative to link the fan experience with the achievement of happy heterosexual coupling, the obsessive return of the romance plot into tales of expertise and social ambition: these reiterated structures testify to the deep hold of class on Hornby’s fiction. Partners simply must be found for the self-obsessed man who, nonetheless, has certain skills or expertise. The passions of the pop fan, which in Hornby’s fiction are seen to both provide meaning and endanger the psyche of his young professionals, must be preserved: but they must also be transformed. Pop ardor is magically altered into a solvent for relationships, the tie that binds.
It is no surprise Hornby’s male *bildung* links the romance genre with social protocols that reproduce the middle class. As Laurie Langbauer observes, romances imagine the management of the protagonist’s desire; the form has traditionally been used to create the desire for private passions that also support public order. Dana Nelson details how the nineteenth-century bourgeois male became the professional, and how true masculinity and the self-discipline of the wage earner became linked. Nelson argues that the masculine professional ideal served as a foundation both for American capitalism and nationalist sentiment. Transgressing the role of bread earner has been a favorite vicarious fantasy for middle-class men. In *High Fidelity*, Rob’s eventual redemption depends on the ability of Dick and Barry to stand outside the norm of professional, middle-class masculinity. Rob’s employees are marginal men, and they charm their audience to a degree. But their charisma is not enough to make either Rob or the readers forget the inherent danger of transgressing normative, professional manhood.

This is not to say that Hornby’s romance plots are simply formulaic. Crucially, the novels intimate that marriage will not resolve key social tensions or even all the personal issues that estrange their heroes. For example, Hornby’s elaborates a couple-friendly critique of the nuclear family in his next novel, *About a Boy* (1997). There, Marcus, an intuitive young boy, concludes at the end of his socialization by Will Freeman, a detached man of leisure, that the heterosexual couple no longer works as an enabling structure for child rearing. Marcus matures under Will’s tutelage, a role that causes Will himself to grow up, but Will and Marcus’s mother, Megan, never become lovers. Even without a passionate link between the two, the implication is that Will is an appropriate surrogate father for Marcus. Marcus himself expresses the need for a new, central authority outside the traditional romantic pair to produce good parenting.

Similarly, in *High Fidelity*, the conventional marriage formula no longer provides convincing closure to the story of Rob and Laura. Instead, in a fascinating turn, the pair is grounded in something more durable than love: shared expertise and training. Laura is shaken by the death of her father, and reenters the relationship with Rob, but she commits neither to the notion of commitment nor to the ideal of a fully reformed partner. Instead, she is bent on establishing Rob’s
confidence within his vocation and career. At novel’s end, the couple seems able to make the long haul, with a “new” Laura shown as capable of constructing and even correcting the list Rob provides of his favorite pop to a music journalist. She demonstrates her capacity to join Rob in the role of rock curator. Hornby implies that the popular can provide a magical solution for the couple—albeit, as I argue, at the expense of other social groups.

In point of fact, pop-culture consumption cannot guarantee normative gender identity; nor does it automatically produce the heterosexual couple, modern patriarchy’s fundamental unit. This is especially true for subcultures that seek a return to an idyllic state prior to the subject’s entrée into the workplace or adult sexuality. John Bloom’s A House of Cards, an ethnography of white adult male baseball card collectors, documents the emergence of card collecting during the 1970s and argues that the collectors evinced a strong nostalgia for their youth, and for an America they recall from their younger days. Not coincidentally, Bloom observes, the bond between these men and the tokens of the national pastime “emerged at a moment in history when advances in civil rights, together with economic stagnation, had encroached upon the economic and social entitlements that white men had enjoyed over the previous twenty-five years” (15). Similarly, one might say, Hornby’s troika of status-conscious record store refugees seeks a nostalgic return through pop music appreciation. Bloom characterizes the world of card collecting as “a largely conservative response to conditions of loneliness that many men may experience,” a solitude that “positions women as culprits guilty of sabotaging special, intimate male relationships” (118). In High Fidelity, Barry even revolts against the notion of shy, withdrawn Dick dating a fellow music devotee. For Hornby’s record collectors as well as Bloom’s trading-card aficionados, pop culture consumption offers mediated access to an idealized, presexual past. This version of rock consumption supports a conventional emotional outlook that brands all women as interlopers on the sacred ground of male memory, as well as blocking figures to homosocial bonding. Unlike Bloom’s collectors, though, preadolescent boy bonding is not the issue in High Fidelity; this is a plainly adolescent version in which “getting laid”—by Marie LaSalle (played by Lisa Bonet in the film, no less)—is as much the object as preserving a securely male realm.
The narrative of *High Fidelity* is vitally concerned with supplanting such a view of rock appreciation as arrested development by transmuting it into the element that holds the heterosexual couple together. Hornby showcases the masculine obsessions that accompany rock connoisseurship and depicts how male rock fandom destabilizes the couple, yet he also implies that a more mature and professional variety of appreciation can somehow resolve the problem. The work of the novel is to turn rock from a symptom of the problem into a recipe for the cure.

Although Hornby’s subsequent novels are less concerned with rock’s social function, they nonetheless recapitulate similar themes in regard to consumption and identity. In *About a Boy*, Will Freeman’s initial relation to pop culture, based on the categories of “cool” and conscious consumption, is diagnosed by the novel as spiritual malaise. Here, as in *High Fidelity*, having good taste is not enough to ensure cultural authority or manhood. However, in this novel, it is not enough for the protagonist to use his expert knowledge for self-improvement, as *High Fidelity* implies. For the middle-class man to matter, he must, like a good professional, use his expertise to provide a service to the public, imagined as a client class. Just so, Will teaches the young, chronically unhip Marcus how to survive in school and how to be cool (of course, that part of Will’s services includes tutoring Marcus on which are the “cool” shoes to buy suggests that Hornby finds it difficult to imagine a personal happiness without shopping). In *How to Be Good*, Hornby portrays the marital struggle of two youngish professionals, a doctor and journalist, over the limits of selfishness and the true meaning of the ancient philosophical desiderata, the Good Life.

Although Hornby explores the ramifications of a masculinity reformed for romance through ever-more-disciplined consumer appreciation more fully in subsequent novels, *High Fidelity* allows us to observe the revision to the category of the popular, and especially rock music, that enables this narrative pattern. It is not only that Rob represents a reformed professional man but that the novel treats the popular as something that operates according to a managerial logic and as a concept that white men can rationalize, organize, and control—lest they be controlled by it. Rivalry between Rob and his male coworkers predictably ends with a single victor: a more disciplined Rob, capable of regulating his affect and impulses better than his
coworkers. The result ties rock to the conservative project of the educated middle class. It is, in fact, because Rob is not a “born” manager that the romance plot must train him, in the process drawing clear lines between the high and low bourgeois.

ROCK AND THE PROFESSIONAL MANAGERIAL CLASS

There is a powerful historical symbiosis between the rock generation and the professional managerial class. Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s essay, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” still the classic description of that class, relates how, in the 1960s, contradictions within it yielded an explicit consciousness of the class privileges that inhered in education and training. Barbara Ehrenreich’s later study, Fear of Falling, specifically inserts rock into a narrative of class consciousness, belonging to the generation that came of age in the 1950s in the industrial West. Rock and roll, Ehrenreich proposes, forged the sensibility of a new youth elite, precisely by allowing it to become conscious of its own class position. Most accounts of the generation that would produce America’s New Left suggest that rock (especially when close to its sources in African-American music) was a simple product of the marginal culture of poor whites and segregated blacks, but received by the dissident bourgeois as bohemian sacrament. In Peter Guralnik’s assessment, rock made a “dent” in “the snug middle-class consciousness of that time and [threw] into confusion some of the deadening rigidity of that world” (18). Guralnik concludes that it was the “very outrageousness of its poses, the swaggering sexuality, the violence which the radio of that day laid at its door—that was the unfailing attractiveness of rock and roll” (18). For BBC disk jockey John Peel, the emergence of punk rock reminded him of the initial vertigo that accompanied the experience of first generation rock: “there was an element of fear as well—you thought, ‘can this be real?’ You went to the gigs and there was a feeling that you were participating in something that had come from another planet, it seemed so remarkable that it was happening at all” (quoted in Marcus, 41). In these accounts, rock represents an outlaw form that can barely be imitated, let alone underwrite a career.

Barbara Ehrenreich’s Fear of Falling inserts several cultural reference points into the story of the coming of age of post–World War II
bourgeois adolescents. For many young people rock provided “a critique of the middle class, bubbling up from America’s invisible ‘others’” (95). If rock music seemed a calculated affront to middle-class decorum, its content was no less antagonistic to bourgeois values. Ehrenreich briefly inventories the extent of rock’s rejection of labor: rock “mocked work (‘Get a Job’), study (‘Don’t know much ‘bout history’), and authority (‘Charlie Brown, you’re a clown’).” It held out no hope for salvation through work. Rock instead presented itself as a “vibrant new consumer culture,” both “addressed to the young and fortified with the repressed defiance of the poor” (Ehrenreich, 95).

Rock ‘n’ roll of the 1960s was a time of boundary and genre breaking. Performers transgressed gender or racial categories and attracted fan bases across the social spectrum. Built on a postwar economic boom, rock flourished in the 1960s alongside other forms of social and political experiment. George Lipsitz describes how “youth culture of the sixties” emerged “in the context of social contradictions” and thus “reflected a full range of aesthetic and social stances, careening between idealism and cynicism, collectivity and individualism, hedonism and selfishness” (231). Before the postwar economic bubble burst, the contradictions inherent in rock practice seemed mere temporary setbacks, moving toward an imminent utopian synthesis. Rock stars seemed like strange hybrids: their insistence on success on their own terms placed them within a recognized tradition of American entrepreneurship. Yet rock icons were also presumed to share the goals of economic and political justice associated with civil rights activists and other social revolutionaries, enough so that the growing cultural authority of the rock star also seemed to suggest the growing prominence of the Movement. Sixties rock icons made it credible to believe that a career could also be aesthetically satisfying (the rock LP was now seen as wide-ranging and as textured as the bebop LP treasured by the jazz aficionado, offering a similarly complex view of everyday life) while simultaneously turning massive profits.

Yet the world around rock changed, with the collapse of the social movements associated with sixties rock. The changes in the historical conjuncture were accompanied by a shoring up of racial and class boundaries previously transgressed by rock culture. A decisive link between rock and big money was forged, and the rise of corporate rock, with its commercial ethos and privileging of professional, virtuoso
music making over amateur product, was secured. Rock lost its viability as social politics, then as cultural politics, finally emerging in its dominant form as simply one consumer practice amid a wide range of lifestyle options.

Or so the story goes. Ehrenreich suggests that the oppositional qualities of rock weren’t so neatly antagonistic to the professional-managerial class (PMC) but rather opened contradictions within it that allowed that class to recognize itself anew. Rock changed, moving from the margins closer to a center, from an alternative to work to a full-fledged enterprise. With the end of the sixties, the notion of the rock artist or “genius” was no longer risible. Moreover, the managerial class changed along with rock (although one could say that rock itself is largely responsible for the value shift among the boomer generation, which is why Guralnik and Barbara Ehrenreich both include rock in their respective portraits of the college-trained, white professionals coming of age in the 1960s). The PMC assumed a new, flexible form that accommodates, indeed welcomes contrary notions and high critical self-consciousness within its complex construction of identity. At this point, what successful bourgeois doesn’t incorporate a bit of the feckless bohemian? Rock knowledge was initially a tool used by the young in their struggle with elders and other authorities that just didn’t get it; rock consumption was used, in other words, to construct meaningful differences among social groups. The story of rock’s oppositional qualities clarifies how the new managerial class gained self-consciousness and solidarity.

What High Fidelity demonstrates is how deeply the current, revised, postrock PMC forgets that it is only a class and goes about naturalizing its norms. In Hornby’s novel, rock has transformed from quasi-cultural politics to a consumer practice that produces conflicted schizophrenic subjects, prone to contradiction and mania, but still functional for the workaday world. The rock connoisseur bears the same symptoms of the schizoid subject produced by other modes of consumption. In High Fidelity, Hornby details rock’s shifts from social practice to privatized, solipsistic, and anxiety-inducing consumption practice in the case of Rob and the other aging adolescents in the book. But Hornby’s aesthetic, tied to a view of rock as mode of consumption, determines the structure of his narrative in ways outside his control.

Accordingly, rock and roll becomes a medium that underwrites
retreat and solipsism, its “proper” response dependent on private acts of listening. Personal meanings displace older narratives linking rock to a community or collective. In High Fidelity, list making offers Rob Fleming a way of organizing his affect, as well as giving shape and structure to a lifetime’s worth of listening. Rock gives Rob an identity but also isolates him, linking him largely to the past. Rob is both sustained and paralyzed by his consciousness of rock tradition: yet this burdensome consciousness also serves to set the true believer apart from the masses. As a result, High Fidelity reveals the persistence of class and rank in the putatively classless world of rock.

Further, as Hornby’s novel illustrates, the development of rock into Art now means that rock can serve as a knowledge base, as a fund to drawn upon for expert claims. When Rob contemplates the edge that the rich and famous have on a man of modest income, he trots out as defense and apology his knowledge of Al Green, setting it squarely against the authoritative knowledge prized by the dominant order. The successful “might have the jump on me when it comes to accepted notions of seriousness” but he adds, he does grasp the niceties of Al Green’s oeuvre, and “as everyone knows, Al Green Explores Your Mind is as serious as life gets” (168). Here and throughout, through reference to a raw, unreconstructed soul music, authentic blackness serves as a commodity doubling as status marker, an index of true reason and right thinking. In the end, the novel ratifies Rob’s earnest wish that esoteric knowledge of Al Green pay off on in ways that are both material and unworldly. It is worth noting that alongside the endless ranking of rock, from the ’60s to the ’90s, the book gives ample space to what today gets referenced as American roots music. Rhythm and blues, precursors to alternative country such as the Byrds and Gram Parsons, and the presence of contemporary alternative country (figured in the character of American singer Marie LaSalle, with whom Rob has a brief affair) are all part of the pop world ranked and evaluated by Rob and his coworkers. The invocation of these different folk musics suggests a complicated form of wish fulfillment. The self-conscious referencing of these musical traditions by the intellectual signifies their symbolic mastery. It also reestablishes a link between the alienated intellectual and the people: with the expert on top of the heap.

High Fidelity does not lack moments when Rob’s microscopic examination of his taste intersects with larger, broader structures of
power. In a tantalizing passage, Hornby’s narrator suggests that compulsive list making offers him compensatory power in lieu of class attainment. He reflects on Charlie, the most financially successful and not coincidentally most mysterious and alluring of his top five old flames, and the difference between Rob and Charlie’s affluent friends:

The difference between these people and me is that they finished college and I didn’t (they didn’t split up with Charlie and I did); as a consequence, they have smart jobs and I have a scruffy job, they are rich and I am poor, they are self-confident and I am incontinent, they do not smoke and I do, they have opinions and I have lists. Could I tell them anything about which journey is the worst for jet lag? No. Could they tell me the original lineup of the Wailers? No. They probably couldn’t even tell me the lead singer’s name. (199)

The difference between “lists” and “opinions” suggests the gulf between an untrained, relatively unschooled, petty bourgeois like Rob, and the poise, charm, and training that give the new establishment its cultural and economic authority. The passage suggests that the list maker is compulsive largely because of the superfluous character of his observations in regard to the dominant culture. The inability to make one’s tastes count within a larger public sphere in part explains much of the motivation behind list production.

However, Hornby’s purpose is to imaginatively overlap, and thus resolve, the keenly felt difference expressed by Rob between himself and the elite. Hornby does this by suggesting that in fact it matters a great deal if one knows the lead singer of the Wailers, just as it pays for the entrepreneur to know how one best prepares for long plane trips. Rob’s rock expertise is made to count as equivalent to the genteel opinion-making culture of the educated elite. That is to say, Hornby’s narrative eventually interprets Rob’s own misgivings regarding his status as nothing more than the misreading by his peers of his own authentic virtue. Despite the apparent surface differences, and the seemingly impassable gulf separating Rob and Charlie’s friends, High Fidelity’s romance plot places Laura in the role of Rob’s status redeemer, implying that Rob’s expertise is finally no different from her skills as a lawyer, skills that locate Laura in the “smart set.” Despite the surface differences between the two, as well as the contrasting life histories that spur on Rob’s own misgivings regarding his status, Rob is represented as having the right managerial stuff.
Rob’s apprehension of class difference in relation to Charlie and her friends emerges in sharper relief than he would like, and he quickly distances himself from his criticism of a social elite. He distinguishes his evaluation from class critique, noting his own desire for upscale consumption: “But they’re not bad people. I’m not a class warrior, and anyway, they’re not particularly posh . . . I want their opinions, I want their clothes” (199). Hornby’s plot sanctions Rob’s obsessions, hinting in this passage that Rob has always potentially been the status-conscious consumer he envies. The project of *High Fidelity* is to convince that Rob “naturally” possesses the status he desires, by virtue of his standing as rock connoisseur.

Its major device for doing so is the introduction of a rival. Ian Raymond, Laura’s new, too-perfect boyfriend, has a dual function in the novel. Not only a blocking agent between Rob and Laura, Ian stands as a reminder to Rob of Rob’s own distance from a professional class, and for us of his entitlement to enter it.11 Ian represents Rob’s Other, a token figure that Rob resents largely because he possesses what Rob lacks. Unlike Rob, Ian has capital and charisma. Nonetheless, in Rob’s revenge fantasy, Ian is definitively marked down for lacking both good taste and indie-rock credentials. Ian’s “opinions” can never match Rob’s own lists as tokens of genuine knowledge, at least in Rob’s mind. The difference between the two gets recognized in terms of competing modes of accommodation to capitalism. If Rob deals in consumer objects that he often refuses to treat as commodities (a tendency most strikingly seen in his refusal to raid another man’s record collection even when an estranged, angry wife makes the collection available at a cheap price to Rob), Ian brandishes a taste that never quite conceals its roots in capital and privilege. As Rob puts it, “I’m starting to remember things now: his dungarees; his music (African, Latin, Bulgarian, whatever fucking world music fad was trendy that week); . . . the terrible cooking smells that used to pollute the stairway; the visitors that used to stay too late and drink too much and leave too noisily” (21). The “terrible smells” represent the preparation of expensive, exotic gourmet foods, the visitors are friends that can afford boisterous leisure without incurring punishment or layoffs, the world music suggests a customer with money to burn, and a taste for novelty in music that requires a Virgin Megastore, not Championship Vinyl, to gratify.
Rob’s distaste for Ian stands for something less personal than the natural animosity between romantic rivals. It also marks the difference between the merely rich and the cognoscenti. The distinguishing characteristic of Rob’s imagined elite rests on the purity of their existential investment in esoteric pop truths unavailable to outsiders. Ian Raymond is compelled to represent the current dominant class, a group that is too demonstrative about its attachment to material things to lay claim to cultural authority. Still, this is the class to which Rob feels that he has been denied entrance despite his merits. Thus framed, the contest between Ian and Rob evokes a larger class dynamic.

Of course, Hornby sees around his narrator, encouraging us to do so. To Rob, his employees are “mercy hires,” even more pathological pop fanatics than Rob. Where Rob believes his list mania gives structure to his life by clarifying the past (though not the present), he criticizes Dick and Barry’s musical obsessions. In Stephen Frears’s film adaptation, Rob overtly marks his difference from Dick and Barry by referring to them as the “musical moron twins.” This statement fends off the possibility that the story may feature moron triplets. Hornby also subtly undercuts Rob’s sense of presumption. After a comic, brusque encounter between Barry and a hapless customer who wishes to buy the wrong Stevie Wonder song for his daughter (“aesthetically” wrong because recorded too late in Wonder’s career, when the Championship Vinyl trio would claim that Wonder was merely popular), where Barry defends the integrity of his own taste rather than perform his job, Rob steps in. He assumes the role of employer and voice of reason. The question regarding what harm the customer has done to Barry receives the spirited rejoinder, “You know what harm he’s done me. He offended me with his terrible taste” (54). Rob casts Barry’s devotion to taste and his personal integrity as comic exaggeration, one in a series of Barry’s own follies. However, in this case Barry reminds Rob that that the same quixotic devotion to quality pop, which can prove fatal for the record store owner competing in the marketplace, characterizes Rob as well. Immediately after the exchange between the two men, Rob interrupts the narrative to justify a chronological, rather than alphabetical, organization of his record collection, the better to preserve his initial, private encounter with the records he’s purchased. Barry’s folly at the record counter is balanced by Rob’s obsessive devotion to pop nostalgia, his own version of the same foible,
but one properly exercised within the private sphere. Both are rendered comic on account of their purism and indifference to how their private devotion to pop affects themselves and others.

Rob, however, needs to believe in a distinction between himself as employer and his employees due to his insecurity over his social status. The trick of the narrative is to get us to believe it, too. Barbara Ehrenreich’s contention that the fear of falling characterizes the managerial class and those who aspire to that class is confirmed in the confused mix of animosity and fraternity Rob demonstrates in both the realms of romance and of the workplace, with the employees who are, like it or not, Rob’s only friends. Both Rob and his employees share the same cultural baggage and the same mode of organizing aesthetic products to sustain their identity and manhood; all of them assume that cultural superiority compensates for economic inferiority. It is Rob alone, though, who experiences the fear of losing whatever status and cultural capital he has amassed, because he is the only character aspiring upward.

Hornby represents Rob’s contest with Ian as a tangle of conflicted impulses, attraction and repulsion; he further suggests that Rob’s status and identity is closer to his employees—his only friends after the breakup—than he is capable of admitting. Yet closure requires that Rob’s superior status regarding Dick and Barry find corroboration, and his passage into the new meritocracy is assured by a corresponding sense that he does have better taste than Ian and “deserves” to win Laura back. The defining moment happens suddenly but completely in a key scene where Laura and Rob work as partners, editing and revising the list Rob gives to a local reporter covering Rob’s return to the DJ club scene. Without much fanfare, Rob accepts Laura’s corrections to the list he provided, in essence confirming her own intimate knowledge of his psychology.

“I don’t believe it,” says Laura when I tell her about Caroline. “How could you?”
“What?”
“Ever since I’ve known you you’ve told me that ‘Let’s Get It On’ by Marvin Gaye was the greatest record of all time, and now it doesn’t even make your top five . . . And what happened to Al Green? And the Clash? And Chuck Berry?” (312)
Rather than perceive the female reporter as a rival for Rob’s affections, Laura has learned enough about rock consumption to know what really matters: aesthetic correctness. Her endeavor to join in on the list making prefigures Rob’s later realization about his need for commitment. But Laura has already put money where her affections lie, by offering Rob financial support for his return to record spinning at nightclubs.

If lists lead to love in *High Fidelity*, they also naturalize hierarchy: there is meant to be a huge gap separating an expertise that ends in romance and one that results in further isolation. While there is much in Rob’s inner monologue that deflates his pretensions, Hornby denies the possibility that alternatives to Rob’s rules of rock taste, which Laura comes to honor and obey, actually exist. Lists may testify to the ubiquity of the evaluative impulse, even in popular arts that intellectuals traditionally have doubted in fact would organize the field. However, lists also fix a specific relation between art and history, privileging past over present. Giving the past an upper hand can be fatal to experimental, innovational activity in the arts and in life.

The empowerment of Rob, secured by the novel’s romance story, also sanctions his list and enshrines his aesthetic. The process amounts to a zero-sum game. For Rob to win, he must find reinforcement and support for his sense that there is an essential, fixed difference between his employees and himself. And here Barry’s side projects, his own bands, must be enlisted in the final triumph of Rob’s (and Hornby’s own) aesthetic, sanctioned in the novel’s close.

Barry plays in a band over the entire course of the book, first in a unit boasting an appropriately aggrandizing (and ironic) moniker, Barrytown, and then in the more aggressive Sonic Death Monkey. After Barry announces that his band will do a set in the middle of Rob’s DJ show, he also announces their name change and the band’s aspiration to perform alternative rock. The band name proclaims their early nineties indie-rock aesthetic, as does Barry’s stated intent to take self-expression into areas that transgress mere convention.

It is Barry, in other words, who represents the old notion that rock constitutes a challenge to the middle class. The previously mentioned exchange between Barry and an apparently middle-aged customer over a Stevie Wonder single is presented as a clash of world
views. To Rob, this customer seems “older than I first thought and wearing a cloth cap and dirty beige raincoat,” bearing signs of the straight world outside the store, no doubt unable to catch the reference to the band made by the Sonic Youth T-shirt that Dick is wearing (37). In Frears’s film, the customer is unambiguously marked as a middle-aged businessman, buying the single for his daughter during a lunch break. Barry’s pop obsession is represented as a passion that routinely searches and destroys the uncool. Hornby, however, makes the scene more difficult to parse out than a comic encounter between the straight world and the hipster; the “cloth cap” and “beige raincoat” of the customer suggest working-class costume, not the sleek confidence of the middle-class manager. The novel renders Rob’s ability to reign in distaste for the hapless customer more attractive than Barry’s ideological extremism. The encounter between Barry and the man in the cloth cap enhances reader confidence in Rob, underscoring the greater “humanity” of the character, as well as his ultimate fitness as store manager.

Unlike Rob, Barry’s pop passion is not harnessed to projects, whether to relationships or to upward mobility. Rob’s attempt to prevent Barry’s band from performing at the club event underwritten by Laura insinuates there is no room for rock as dissent in Rob’s top five:

“Look Barry. There’s going to be people from Laura’s work there, people who own dogs and babies and Tina Turner albums. How are you going to cope with them?”

“How are they going to cope with us, more like. We’re not called Barrytown anymore, by the way. . . . We’re called SDM. Sonic Death Monkey.”

“Sonic Death Monkey? Barry, you’re over thirty years old. You owe it to yourself and your friends and to your mum and dad not to sing in a group called Sonic Death Monkey.”

“I owe it to myself to go out on the edge, Rob, and this group really does go out on the edge. Over it, in fact. . . . That’s what we want. Reaction. And if Laura’s bourgeois lawyer friends can’t take it, then fuck ‘em. Let ‘em riot. We can handle it. We’ll be ready.” (303).

Yet *High Fidelity* is Rob’s story, and no one gets to go over the edge. We are not informed as to the SDM set list, though from Barry’s announcement, “Dance Music for Old People,” Laura’s name for Rob’s return as a DJ to the club scene, would not seem a suitable rubric. In
Frears’s film adaptation, Sonic Death Money, renamed yet again as the Jive Five, perform the sultry and always-winning “Let’s Get It On,” while at the close of Hornby’s novel the renamed “Backbeat” perform another perennial favorite, “Twist and Shout.”

As an alternative to class struggle, Laura’s lawyer friends and the musical fringe join together to celebrate the past in High Fidelity’s fantasy resolution. The change in the set list amounts to an olive branch for a mass audience of diversified tastes. It is hard to imagine any reader of the book (or filmgoer), regardless of personal taste or age, not feeling interpellated by the performance of a Beatles or Marvin Gaye song at a climactic moment. Hornby skillfully plays on our nostalgic desire to have had “Let’s Get It On” as our prom tune, even if we were too old, or too young, for this to be the case.

But nostalgia can produce dubious aesthetic judgments, not to mention bad politics. Sonic Death Monkey represents what Rob fears most—experiment in aesthetic form, no doubt accompanied by a provocative content. The novel disallows the possibility of SDM’s success, so that the very idea that their music would equal “genuine” dissent comes off as mere adolescent bluster. For both Dick and Barry, their grip on the security blanket of music is too strong for them to relinquish it and aspire to upward mobility as Rob does. Sonic Death Monkey’s performance also depicts Barry’s “conversion” from antibourgeois rocker to bourgeois formalist. Part of the surprise of the book (and the pleasure viewers derive from Jack Black’s spot-on Marvin Gaye cover at the close of High Fidelity the film) results from the reassurance that Barry as singer can in fact croon and seduce and not merely assault an audience. As readers, we are positioned to hail art that gives us what we want, and encouraged to mistrust rock experiments that fail to produce immediate results, that seem too stylized, or that confront audience expectations.

It is a safe bet that Hornby’s nostalgia might hail a large portion of his public: these are the songs that a generation is likely to have wished it grew up with, even if it didn’t. However, the result is a closure strategy that risks turning the novel into a mere device for producing aesthetic halfway measures. With all tensions released by the performance of “Let’s Get It On,” or exorcised by the ritual workout of “Twist and Shout,” Hornby intimates that we indeed can have it all: love and lists. The familiar rebel stance, now codified, is esteemed
over the new and unfamiliar. Rock is made into a tradition so that anything new, including (in the Frears film) the home recordings of the skateboard kids put out by Rob on his record label, must be seen to confirm and extend this tradition. As trustworthy expert, Rob stands at the gateway to the rock canon.

Though criticized, the past is affirmed, rather than revised, by this critique. In like manner, Rob’s sensitive brand of pop despotism is partly undermined by context; however, the redemption Rob’s taste receives at the close of the novel is complete. Laura must join in on the list making; Barry is compelled to sing the same R & B standards Rob loves. The logic of the choices made by these characters suggests that Hornby honors the imperatives of a managerial class in *High Fidelity’s* close, a class often suspicious of dissent outside of its own quarters, since they believe their own dynamic practice incorporates self-revision and critique. It partly explains the Janus-faced aspect of the novel, which can seem both cutting edge and conciliatory.

Clearly, Hornby is not blind to how class structures subjects, or organizes the meaning and cultural politics of rock. Yet his representation of rock consumers and his rock aesthetic buttresses a position that asserts that differences between aesthetic products matter immensely, a position not far from the notion that some people—i.e., tastemakers—matter more than others. The result is an internalization of difference: dissent is no longer somewhere out there but rather a tool of the dominant class. Rock accordingly is pressed into service of the managerial class.

**POSTSCRIPT: HORNBY’S LISTS**

I have argued that Hornby both distances himself from Rob and his obsessions while reinforcing the hierarchic rule of taste-making elites. While Rob is gently mocked, there is no endeavor to represent a way outside the petty tyranny of personal taste, a tyranny that eternalizes contingent values and artistic practice specific to a historic moment and a particular generation.

Unfortunately, judging from Hornby’s own rock criticism, there is every reason to believe in a troubling consistency between Rob’s tastes and Hornby’s own aesthetic program. His entertainments help gloss
his criticism, and vice versa. This point is worth underscoring, since Hornby now exhibits a role as a cultural arbiter, a rock critic with the podium of the New Yorker; it matters what he says and doesn’t like. There is a strong element of self-congratulation to Hornby’s reviews of pop for that magazine. He exudes confidence that a tradition-bound view of the present offers the best perspective on current pop.

Part of the confidence comes from the perspective secured by class privilege. The managerial class is late capitalism’s meaning-making class. They are also our style setters, though modest about this achievement. It must be admitted that this class hasn’t, as David Brooks observes, “established clear lines of authority,” largely because “it still has trouble coming to terms with authority” (46). In keeping with the house style of the managerial elite, Hornby often offers rather endearing admissions of personal defeat when his aesthetic is countered by product that proclaims the values of a new counterculture, like hip-hop. In a recent review of current top-ten products, Hornby concedes that the “liberal values” of his generation “constitute an Achilles’ heel: we’re not big on guns, consumerist bragging, or misogyny . . . and that is the ground on which Eminem and his crew choose to fight” (“Billboard Top Ten,” 168). He adds, winningly, “I know when I’m beaten; I can only offer sporting congratulations and a firm handshake.”

Yet Hornby’s deference here is more like noblesse oblige. He can be generous to court jesters in large part because he is confident that their product will in no way transform his personal canon or the dominant pop canon that his respectable wisdom normalizes. Nor is it surprising that Hornby the critic has little tolerance for rock that doesn’t strike him as instantly accessible. List culture is curator culture, and such culture tends to be as conservative. The valorization and aestheticization of rock can work to democratize the form. But rock formalism can also constrict artist and listener options.

The rock canon can be closed off along with its demarcation, and living in the past esteemed as the noble option, rather than conceding to the new.

I shall, when I have recovered my strength, creep back to my little private Top Ten, which consists of penniless artists like the Pernice Brothers and Joe Henry and Shuggie Otis and Olu Dara, who make music full of thoughtful, polite ironies and carefully articulated cynicism and
references to our glorious heritage. But I won’t kid myself that it’s pop music—not anymore. (168)

This is fully ingenuous. Hornby’s own brand of list consciousness has always been about preserving and valorizing the “little private Top Ten,” consisting of penniless artists, who are historically tried and tested to allow for the utmost identification between intellectuals and artists. “Polite ironies” and “carefully articulated cynicism” not only make for good, unpopular pop, they are the values that sustain the sense of difference and privilege a college-educated elite require for self-definition and sustenance.

Hornby’s assessment of the Billboard Top Ten replicates structures forged in his fictional work, where nostalgia effectively absolves the critic from the responsibility of finding value in artifacts with a recent make. I’m not speaking figuratively when I claim that Hornby’s nostalgia for pop saves him from labor as a critic. It is hard to imagine instances where a music journalist would make it a point of pride to insist on the inability to seriously consider what he or she reviews. Yet, as Kevin Dettmar observes, Hornby did just that when reviewing the band Radiohead’s anticipated release, Kid A, for the New Yorker.14 It proved a commercial success, but one wouldn’t gather that from Hornby’s sublime impatience with an ambitious, experimental young rock band. Nick Hornby’s rock criticism offers bite-sized portions of the same, familiar nostalgia that secures narrative closure in High Fidelity: not simply nostalgia, or elegy, but something more like reaction. High Fidelity’s concluding moment, where rock points backward and not forward, where we are reassured rather than threatened by its form or content, proclaims the conservative cast of Hornby’s obsessive—and restricted— notion of pop. The new meritocracy, with strong convictions as to their right to cultural hegemony, feels no pressing need to let newcomers into the club, unless they brandish their knowledge of rock “tradition.”

Lists help give rock a pedigree or tradition, but they can unduly circumscribe meaning. They sanctify and elevate the genre, a not-altogether inappropriate or novel move within rock. As long as rock, like jazz and blues, proliferates and persists, its semantics will change. Curators are inevitable, and informed retrospective views are not to be despised; they can prove invaluable. But the best criticism fosters
an environment where risk taking is encouraged, to the mutual benefit of art and audience. The success of Hornby’s nostalgia-rock narrative, his paean to the joy of evaluation, tends to privilege fealty to the past over other possible relations to traditions or history.¹⁵

None of this means that Hornby’s work is inconsequential, or that rock no longer signifies, even if rock now seems to matter to fewer people, and in a radically different social context where bands “matter” most to their record label’s profit margins. Stanley Booth puts it neatly: bands like the Rolling Stones “still do more or less what they used to,” but “history has changed the context in which [the music] happens” (quoted in Ward). However, as David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe remind us, culture is a site of political articulation where allegiances and identities are formed and, on occasion, challenged. Pop culture fans can contest a capitalist status quo by availing themselves of alternative practices: including, as a host of politically minded contemporary rock bands and fanzine writers demonstrate, the creative practice of rock fandom and music making. Finally, Hornby’s novel is culpable for making it more difficult to imagine rock as anything more than a mode of consumption.

Notes

1. A note on methodology: this paper is not an attempt to bring the tools of popular musicology to a reading of Nick Hornby. I am working within a tradition of cultural studies that addresses the politics of popular culture, a tradition initiated by Raymond Williams and extending to Janice Radway, Dick Hebdige, Susan Willis, and Lawrence Grossberg, among many others.

2. I invoke romance because the genre has traditionally organized “impossible desires, allowing . . . a way to indulge them,” in Laurie Langbauer’s words. Langbauer also recognizes that protagonist desire often reflects social and patriarchal projections (130). I am also following Pierre Bourdieu’s reading of romance as a meeting of two habitus, or class orientations, as well as two people. Romance is built on the shared values, goals, tastes and interests binding the pair (241–44). Bourdieu argues that the building blocks of relationships are found in class-specific forms.

3. Langbauer’s book details how definitions of the romance depend on their utility for a patriarchy that also determines the parameters of character for the romance heroine.

4. As Dana Nelson asserts, “Professionalism would soon—and still does—function as a class/corporate enterprise of occluded authority” (14). This is especially pertinent to High Fidelity, where the authority granted to Rob and his version of popular are presented as solid facts, and the social dynamics of power carefully hidden. In
Hornby's novel as elsewhere, professional discipline is defined, in Nelson's words, "over and against an . . . arena of Otherness: women, nonwhites, the primitive poor, the insane, criminals, laborers" (15).

5. Marcus prefers "human pyramids," or large social networks, to the romantic couple: "I just don't think couples are the future," he confesses to Will, adding, "You're safer as a kid if everyone's friends. When people pair off, it's more insecure" (304).


7. See also Ellen Willis on rock as commerce and counterculture in "Janis Joplin," included in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll*.

8. Compare Immanuel Wallerstein's ingenious argument that the bourgeois has always desired the status of the aristocrat they replaced. The bourgeois class desires to assume the role of cultural savant rather than the crusty Puritan wage earner. David Brooks's popular *Bobos in Paradise* offers a light, breezy, but near-irrefutable argument/anatomy of the current meritocracy and their/our role in defining cultural styles.

9. As Scott Wilson remarks, "Deleuze and Guattari's notion of schizophrenia should not be read as an alternative or resistance to capitalism, but as something close to its current modus operandi" (476).

10. The end of Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* suggests a similarity between Doyle's aspiring musicians and Hornby's record fanatics in their instrumental use of folk or ethnic musics. The young Irish band loses their lead singer and their identity as a soul revival band. They become a country band as soon as their manager/Sven-gali/cultural theorist Jimmy Rabite plays them the Byrds' "I Feel a Whole Lot Better." The abrupt turnaround suggests that the band (and the novel) is less about forging ties between African-American and Irish peoples than a search for a music that empowers knowing elites. The Commitments' desire to make Irish soul music is retroactively exposed as a feint: the substitution of an exotic, commodified blackness for a less mediated relation to people of color.

11. In an inspired moment, the film adaptation of *High Fidelity* stabilizes the meaning of Rob's simultaneous attraction/repulsion to Ian. When Ian visits Rob's workplace and reprimands him for trying to gain Laura's attentions, Rob's employees join Rob in comic fantasy sequences of violent reprisal. Phones and air conditioners are crashed on the head of Rob's hapless fantasy Ian. These scenes gain their comic charge, at least in part, from their flattening of classed ambiguities raised by novel and film. Here, without hesitation, Rob slips down the class ladder to Dick and Barry's subaltern status. They act as a team against the upper-class interloper on their home turf, the workplace. Since so much energy and space is given to the rhetorical construction of an absolute difference between Rob and his employees, the sight of them acting in concert in the film is cathartic.

12. On the work of evaluative judgment in disparate cultural realms, including pop culture fandom, see Simon Frith, especially chapter one, "The Value Problem in Cultural Studies," 3–21.

13. What I label curator rock bears a great resemblance to what Kevin J. H. Dettmar
describes as the new curmudgeonly “Rock Critic,” in “Is Rock and Roll Dead?” As Dettmar suggests, rock critics who make it a point of pride to note that they’ve stopped listening to new music, or that new music no longer transforms their sense of the expressive potential of the medium, are on the rise. This paper expands on Dettmar’s observation and asks whether there is a more systemic reason for this critical shutdown besides generational fatigue. The genesis of this critical conservatism may be allied to the dynamics of self-maintenance and reproduction of a new elite. Regarding Hornby specifically, Dettmar concedes that pressures of audience expectation and the publishing house may compel Hornby to act the reactionary for New Yorker readers. I contend that a strong and persistent thread of reaction links the nostalgia aesthetics promulgated in High Fidelity to Hornby’s own critical protocols.

14. See Curtis White’s devastating review of Hornby’s Kid A review. White sees Hornby’s finger waving as the gesture of a comfortable neocapitalist demanding that moody aesthetes put an end to their misbehaving and listen to good, managerial sense. Here is White’s paraphrase of Hornby’s argument: “in the World of Art according to Nick Hornby, the first and highest principle should be fair exchange, you should ‘get your money’s worth,’ as his mother probably told him . . . Hornby’s aesthetic is the aesthetic of the balance sheet.”

15. Record companies seem to be ahead of many rock critics on the concept of active curating. There are several rock LP and CD box sets that look back to forge a new aesthetic, or that challenge present-day performers to look at the past in order to move forward. The release of the Bob Dylan LP box set Biograph (Columbia, 1985) proved that a steady, careful glance over Dylan’s career provides a new aesthetic by which the singer’s career might be assessed. It set up the career, rather than the LP, as the unit of measurement by which Dylan’s achievement should be judged. The Nuggets CD box set (Rhino, 1998) and Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music (re-released by Smithsonian Folkways, 1997) both stand as generative acts of recollection, the latter inspiring at least two generations of folk musicians.

Works Cited


