

1968: A Global Perspective

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New Left in Victorian Drag: The Case of *The Rolling Stones' Rock and Roll Circus*

My paper sets the 1968 television film *The Rolling Stones' Rock and Roll Circus* (1968, dir. Michael Lindsay-Hogg) in the context of a broader story about the relations between English rock and the politics of post-WWII British working-class culture. The program was a bid by the Rolling Stones to outdo their friendly rivals, the Beatles, who had just delivered the critically panned *Magical Mystery Tour* on Boxing Day, 1967. The film casts the Stones both as rock performers and seedy circus emcees for a variety rock bill. The concert performances were recorded in December 1968, however, and the period pastiche of the program masks a more serious attempt to affiliate with the plebian past, and address the gap between rock music and revolutionary politics.

I argue the film's visual hybrid is a conscious effort to detach the new English rock from its association with the music industry and reclaim it as neo-working class culture. The Victorian trappings of the *Rock and Roll Circus* program may seem odd from our vantage point, but this mis-en-scene would have been especially resonant for a post WWII British youth, evoking childhood memories of working-class entertainment distinct from a recognizable mass media, and relatively untainted by modern consumerism. The aim was to situate rock music and musicians within a broader tradition of working class history and struggle that would answer the objections to rock culture articulated by an older generation of socialist activists that rock music represented a culture of hedonism that would divert the British working class from their historic mission.