

That DEVIL Music

In his genesis of rock and roll, James Miller adds tough lyrics to the standard romantic chorus of its history

FLOWERS IN THE DUSTBIN: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977, by James Miller. Simon & Schuster, 415 pp., \$26.

By Michael Kramer

WHEN YOUR last book, titled "The Passion of Michel Foucault" (1993), is a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, writing about rock and roll might seem beneath you.

Not so for James Miller, director of the liberal-studies program at the New School and author of works on Rousseau, Marxist theory and the New Left of the 1960s. The former popular-music critic for Newsweek (1981-1990) and the original editor of "The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll" (1976), Miller is as fascinated with the lowdown world of big beats as he is with the highbrow world of big ideas. Most crucially, he is able to negotiate between the two with an unparalleled ease and dexterity.

Taking its title from a lyric by the Sex Pistols, "Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977" is a bold, provocative study, worthy of placement alongside the best writing on rock. The book consists of a series of linked essays and is, as Miller puts it, "a work of synthesis," drawing from the memoirs, interviews and research of others. Yet because of his journalistic eye for the telling detail, his elegant musical analysis and his sophisticated sociological observations, Miller is able to offer new insights; his goal is to move beyond "a familiar and essentially romantic narrative" of rock's development. Instead, he aims "to see the story of rock's global triumph more clearly for what it is: an enduring puzzle that has yet to be properly appreciated, much less explained."

Though "Flowers in the Dustbin" progresses chronologically, it is by no means comprehensive. Nonetheless, in sterling pieces often pegged to specific dates (for example, "July 30, 1954: Elvis Discovers His Body"), a larger picture of rock history emerges, one with a number of recurring themes. Among other ideas, Miller writes about the inspirational excitement of rock's simple musical form, often performed by essentially amateur practitioners. He also explores the importance of electronic technology and studio manipulations since rock's inception.

Additionally, Miller emphasizes the music's intertwined history with mass media, not only recordings, but also radio, television and film. He chronicles the complicated race relations in the making of rock. And as part of his effort to look at rock unromantically,



See MUSIC on B11

That Devil Music

MUSIC from B9

Miller pays close attention to the crass commercial aspects of the music and its surrounding cultural milieu.

Most interestingly, Miller cocks his ears to listen for more subtle motifs lurking within rock's roar. In particular, he identifies a yearning for transcendental communion, an impulse — arising suddenly, vanishing just as quickly — toward utopianism. For Miller, this is actually the central fantasy that attracts players and listeners to rock — the music's suggestiveness of a world, or at least a moment in time, in which people might live freely, equally, joyfully, wildly. He detects this yearning in everything from doo-wop's "sublime serendipity" to the Beatles' "listen, relax, float downstream" psychedelia on "Sgt. Pepper" to the marketing of rock and roll's "rapturous transcendence" with both David Bowie (as Ziggy Stardust) and Bruce Springsteen (as "Bruce Springsteen, American Superhero").

In Miller's telling, rock's utopian fantasy possesses many wrinkles of irony. For instance, he grants that Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" was "the product of the coldest sort of commercial calculation," yet to Miller it also presented rock and roll as "embodying a not ignoble vision of an America trans-

formed, of Mind and Body, Black and White, dancing the same dance, moving to the same beat, as kids, en masse, joined in their own brand of Dionysian revelry, watered down and trite, but genuinely uplifting, all the same."

While he is attracted to the utopianism in rock, Miller also recognizes the darker aspects of the music's Dionysian dream. He writes critically of the violence at the Altamont concert, of Jim Morrison's puerile version of nihilism and of the infantile anarchism of the Sex Pistols. One detects a certain sadness and frustration in these particular essays; they take on the tone of the former believer who has been burned by, or simply outgrown, the passionately naive idealism that rock can so powerfully convey.

Though Miller approaches rock from a guarded stance, he is still very much a fan. He seems most excited about previously unexplored corners of the rock story. "Flowers in the Dustbin" opens not with Elvis or Little Richard or Bill Haley, but with a wonderful essay on the obscure jump-swing vocalist Wynonie Harris, singer of the proto-rock song "Good Rockin' Tonight." Miller writes that "by popularizing the word 'rock,' Harris' recording would herald a new era in American popular culture . . . Later in the piece, Miller concludes that "for Wynonie Harris and those who would follow in his footsteps, from Chuck Berry to Mick Jagger to Prince, the new music would, in time, become . . . a way of life, a free life, an 'only life,'"

When Miller does address the conventional narrative of rock history, he reilluminates it. For instance, he identifies the subtext of homosexual desire at work in many male rock groups, quoting Andrew Loog Oldham, the first manager of the Rolling Stones: "It was always the sex in rock 'n' roll that attracted me," Oldham explains. "The sex that most people didn't realize was there. Two guys . . . were meant to be singing together to some girl, but really they were singing to each other."

The flaw in "Flowers in the Dustbin" is Miller's decision to end the book in 1977. The death of Elvis Presley and the rise of the Sex Pistols that year certainly provide a tidy thematic conclusion, but could it really be true that, as Miller claims, rock "as a musical style, as a cluster of values, as an ingredient in a variety of subcultures around the world . . . had been firmly established"? Aren't new technologies, modes of communication and systems of distribution, as well as societal values, still evolving? And won't rock, the lingua franca of popular musical forms, reflect these transformations?

The answers to these questions are to be found in closer studies of more recent styles of rock. In the meantime, James Miller's reasoned but heartfelt analysis and refreshing, unorthodox approach lay down a solid backbeat for subsequent examinations of rock's enigmatic history. And that's truly something to wop-bop-a-lu-bop about.