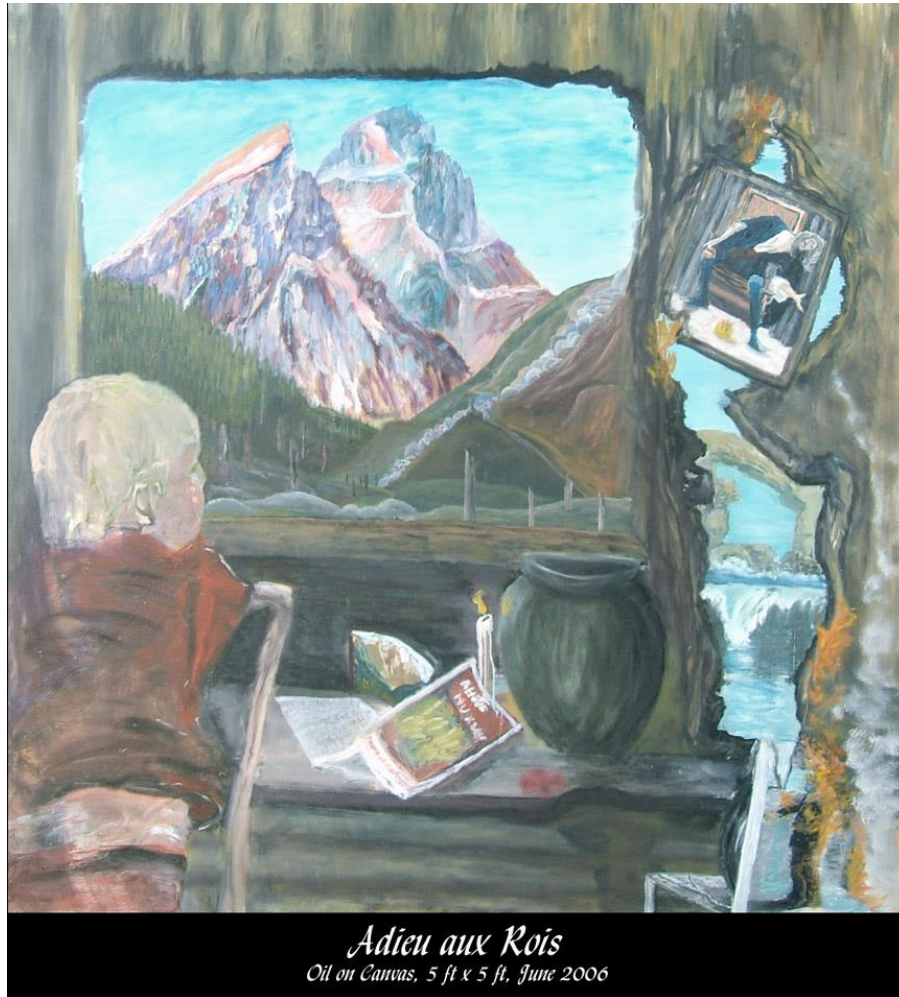


Mental Illness References in Rock 'n' Roll

Written by Warren Watson
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My Painting: Farewell to Return on Investments (ROI's)

I look all white, but my mom was black. Pete Townshend actually wrote in the song *Substitute*, "I look all white, but my dad was black."

Before anybody thinks this is a racist statement, I must say that I think black refers to the black mood of depression. Winston Churchill, one of the all-time great leaders, people with followers, who tend to be rock singers now (Current political leaders do not even know how to balance a check book), referred to his debilitating bouts of depression as his "black dogs."

I am sure Townshend had a parent with untreated mental illness. It would be fair to say that he wanted to be substituted for someone with a parent without mental illness (or a parent with adequately treated mental illness, perhaps?). Yes, I know the song seems to concentrate on a current girlfriend trying to find a substitute for a wealthy lover that had broken up with her.

Both are touchy emotional subjects, so Townshend sidestepped the issue by incorrectly stating that the Who was a substitute for the Rolling Stones. The one brief statement of "my dad was black" was one more statement than the zero statements about the Rolling Stones in the song.

If *Behind Blue Eyes* is about mental illness, then the line, "No one knows what it's like to be the bad man to be the sad man," really underrepresents the illness because being depressed is nothing like being sad. The bad man fits because a person with mental illness is often seen as evil and thus isolated.

Jimi Hendrix sung about manic depression, but I got the impression from listening to the mere repetition of the words "manic depression" without some tell-tale phrase, that the song was written by an outsider to mental illness, except perhaps the self-imposed mental illness of substance abuse.

Syd Barrett is a good example of frying one's brain with acid (self-imposed or self-inflicted mental illness). *Shine on You Crazy Diamond* is a tribute by Pink Floyd to their former (and founding) member.

Rush wrote a song on the *Farewell to Kings* album, called *Cinderella man*, about the manic depressive who walks in the rain. When one is manic, one is so incredibly hot that one wants to walk in the cooling rain or take one's clothes off if the rain is not available. The song rings true. Walking in the rain is an excellent description. "Taking one's clothes off" probably would be misinterpreted by those people whose mind goes where it is used to going.

Hotel California may be about the drug subculture of California or the Californian way of living, but to me, it sounds like a mad house. If the song is about drugs, then

insanity from Schizoaffective disorder and self-imposed insanity from street drugs are very similar.

"You can check out anytime you like but you may never leave" rings true that dying, perhaps suicide, is the only escape from mental illness. It may feel like that if mental illness is untreated or inadequately treated. However, that excellent lyric is completely false because modern professional help (psychiatry) is superlatively beneficial for mental illness and substance abuse.

Eight Miles High by the Byrds seems to dance between substance abuse and mental illness. The title directly refers to getting high, but the Byrds explained it meant an airplane. However, most planes are six miles in altitude. The line "some living some standing alone," could simply mean stardom isolates, but it also describes mental illness.

The mind is a wonderful thing, that mental illness takes away, and psychiatry brings it back. The mind leads to the doors of perception.

Jim Morrison named his band after the doors of perception. Aldous Huxley also wrote a book by that title. Both may have been referring to Blake's work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.



"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

– William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

In a side note, the blog, *The Wall of Sound*¹, produced a list of the top fifty rock songs about mental health. Except for *Behind Blue Eyes* and *Shine on You Crazy Diamond*, our lists are mutually exclusive. The fact, that they missed most of the songs I mentioned, seems odd.

¹ The Wall Admin, Top 50 Rock Songs About Mental Health, The Wall of Sound, Retrieved September 6, 2021 from <https://wallofsoundau.com/2018/10/10/top-50-rock-songs-about-mental-health/>