
From Our Readers

Backmasking brouhahas

Tom McIver's article "Backmasking, and Other Backward Thoughts About Music" (*SI*, Fall 1988) highlights the paranoia that all too often accompanies fundamentalism. Some readers may not be aware, however, that in many cases the existence of the purported backward "messages" on rock-and-roll recordings has been debunked.

In his engaging book *Big Secrets* (Quill, 1983), William Poundstone details his examination of some of the more notorious claims; those messages found to be present were innocuous. A follow-up report is contained in Poundstone's *Bigger Secrets* (Quill, 1986). Other material of interest to skeptics covered in these books includes subliminal effects in motion pictures, Scientology revelations, and "psychic" stunts by Kreskin and Uri Geller.

John Prager
Bay City, Mich.

It is unfortunate that Tom McIver was unaware of my research on backward messages in rock music. In 1982, I submitted written testimony to the legal counsel for California's Consumer Protection and Toxic Materials Committee. The paper focused on the absurdity of a music-labeling law and also attacked the notion that our minds could comprehend backward speech.

In the process of examining recordings, I was surprised to find there were

indeed recognizable words and phrases when certain tapes were played in reverse. Some of these recordings are listed by McIver. With the help of phonetician Ian Catford and speech scientists Ray Daniloﬀ and George Allen, I was able to show, using phonetic analysis and voice prints, that a few singers had slurred lyrics in order to produce intelligible utterances when played in reverse (cf. Walker and Daniloﬀ 1983; Walker 1985 and 1987). I was able to reproduce several of the forward/backward segments found on Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" and Electric Light Orchestra's "Eldorado." These two songs contained many reversed segments. In fact, virtually every line of "Stairway" seems to have a targeted "backwording."

McIver mentions one of the "Stairway" messages, "Here's to my sweet Satan," which derives from the reverse of "There's still time to change. . . ." It is slurred by singer Robert Plant so that the word "there's" is produced by nasalizing with tongue tip in an initial /d/ position. It can be roundly transcribed as /ndes/, and in reverse becomes /sedn/ which is close to "Satan." Several lines in the song begin with "There's." The reversals are distorted, but the listener's perceptual restoration kicks in. These reversals are too numerous to be simply discarded as coincidence. Besides, there are clues in the lyrics that there is something hidden in the song—e.g., "If you listen long and hard, the tune will come to you at last."

Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin has been obsessed with the infamous occultist

Aleister Crowley; it was Crowley who advocated listening to phonographic recordings in reverse—back in 1929! Doing things backward has long been associated with ceremonial magic. Page purchased Crowley's Scottish mansion, where he and Plant ostensibly composed "Stairway" their first evening in the house. Plant hinted that it was as if someone were pushing his pen—the departed Crowley no doubt. It is my contention that several rock groups have attempted backwording because of Crowley's teachings. Whether or not they erroneously believe that the "subconscious mind" can be affected by these reversed messages is something only the recording artists can answer. The fundamentalists, however, have caused much ado about GNIGHTON.

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- . 1987. How to produce forward/backward recordings (without supernatural guidance). *Journal of Popular Music and Society*, 11(2):91-93.
- Walker, M. W., and R. G. Daniloff. 1983. On the controversy surrounding backward messages in rock music. American Speech-Hearing-Language Assoc. convention, Cincinnati.

Like Tom McIver, I too was quite taken aback with the article in the *Los Angeles Times* on Susumu Ohno and the musical DNA. With the great deal of ambiguity afforded for each note, one can easily write a tuneful melody from any portion of DNA or RNA. In fact, soon after I read the article, I copied out a length of DNA from a recent *Science* article and proceeded to write several different, but pleasant tunes from the same DNA strand. The trick lies not only in the ambiguity of the *pitch* and *duration* of each note, but also in the ability to choose any *key* for the piece. Conse-

quently one can decide a priori if the melody should be a G-minor dirge or an A-flat-major waltz. With such lack of limitations, one can compose throughout a broad range of styles and easily project one's feelings about the meaning of a particular gene onto the music. With little additional effort, one can characterize these tunes in the style of a celebrated composer. With the wealth of education behind him, I am surprised that the distinguished scientist Susumu Ohno doesn't recognize this.

David E. Young, M.D.
Walnut Creek, Calif.

Tom McIver correctly notes that rock music was once denounced for its rhythm and "savage" jungle origins." He is too polite. The fundamentalists and their friends were a good deal more explicit. Rock, and jazz before it, was regularly condemned as "nigger music." The "jungle beat" was somehow to transform good, white, and presumably sexless Christians into raging rapists and wantons, which is what they assumed all blacks to be. I think it is a good idea to be reminded just how nasty these folks really were, and still are.

Daniel Cohen
Port Jervis, N.Y.

For the first time I was embarrassed and disgusted by one of your articles, Tom McIver's "Backward Masking, and Other Backward Thoughts About Music." What vexed me was not that the article hardly attempted to disprove, beyond mere unsupported statements and the quick mention of one study, the claims fundamentalists make about backward masking (though, admittedly, their nutty quotes are pretty damning in themselves). Nor was I particularly disturbed by the author's somewhat skeptical if not entirely credulous discussion of subliminal messages. However, in the last paragraph of his summation, he states as fact something that I consider utter nonsense and that is entirely irrelevant to the article

and the journal. He states: "The ironic thing about the anti-backmasking crusade is that much of the music accused of harboring these demonic messages truly is an unhealthy influence on kids."

There it is, an ignorant, biased, bald assertion. For these words no proof is offered, no authorities are cited, no arguments are made; it's simply stated as if obvious.

First, rock music (even the "unhealthy" kind McIver probably is referring to, most likely heavy metal and maybe some punk, though he doesn't bother to enlighten us) gives a large number of people much joy, and even seems to positively inspire a few. Second, even if McIver's incredible statement were true, the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER is not the proper forum for it; possibly some journal that discusses psychology or sociology would be interested in printing his anti-rock-and-roll message. . . .

Steven Kurtz
Los Angeles, Calif.

Orgone Obsession

I enjoyed Martin Gardner's article "Reich the Rainmaker: The Orgone Obsession" (SI, Fall 1988), an excellent exposé of the claptrap ideas of this flaky mad scientist; but lest readers of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER think that "Orgonomy" died more than 40 years ago along with Wilhelm Reich, I have news for them.

Orgone therapy is alive and well, at least in the Washington, D.C., area, and is advertised in the Spring 1988 issue of *Pathways*, a newsletter in tabloid form containing hundreds of ads for every imaginable sort of metaphysical manure, holistic horror, and psychic pabulum, plus a few that are very hard to imagine.

A local M.D. and psychiatrist is advertising his services as an "orgone therapist" who has been trained under one Ellsworth Baker, M.D., no less, and vows to renew one's love life and orgone energy toward the successful fulfillment of one's mental and physical health. Old frauds never die, they don't even fade away. They are constantly being rediscovered

and passed off as New Era discoveries.

One can easily understand why Paul Kurtz is suffering his "skeptics burnout" in this war without end. CSICOP may win a few battles here and there, but as P. T. Barnum reminded us, gullible humans are being born every minute; and they will forever be conned by the greedy media putting money ahead of truth.

W. H. Watkins
Sperryville, Va.

Jahn on Princeton experiments

I would like to make just a few brief points of response to the two paragraphs alluding to our work in "Improving Human Performance: What About Parapsychology?" (SI, Fall 1988, p. 40).

1. While 50.02 percent success in the controlled PK [psychokinesis] experiments is indeed about the regularly replicated level, over our present 760,000-trial REG database the statistical likelihood of this results occurring by chance is 2×10^{-4} . Over a comparable database, our macroscopic Random Mechanical Cascade (RMC) experiment yields essentially the same statistical result. We regard the identification of this particular scale of effect as an important quantitative indicator of the nature of the phenomena involved.

2. The vague accusation of "inadequate documentation" should be balanced by the following fact: We have issued more than 1,000 pages of documentation, including several refereed journal articles, scores of technical reports, and one entire book, wherein are presented in full all data, all protocols, and all technical equipment and procedures ever employed in this laboratory. All of these were provided to the NRC committee, and are available to any interested reader.

3. As we have regularly informed all previous propagators of the myth, including the authors of the NRC report, the attribution of the success of the experiments solely to one prolific operator is both qualitatively and quantitatively incorrect. For example, of the 33 operators who have completed one or more

REG experimental series, more than two-thirds have achieved results in each of the directions of intention. Of these, three have been statistically significant in the high direction; three in the low direction; and five in the high-low split. The single operator to whom the report refers actually ranks *twelfth* in high-intention-effect size and *fifth* in low. To be sure, the comparatively large database of this operator raises the relative contribution to the overall statistical result, but even when equal-size data sets from all 33 operators are concatenated, the combination is still significant at 5×10^{-3} . Once again, we regard this accumulation of total effect from many marginal, but quite replicable, contributions as an important characteristic of the phenomena that has unfortunately been obfuscated by much of the research with "gifted subjects," and by the NRC representation. This issue is discussed in detail in our technical report "Individual Operator Contributions in Large Data Base Anomalies Experiments" (PEAR 88002).

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Astrology and President Bush

One legacy of President Reagan's involvement with astrology (*SI*, Fall 1988) remains in the White House, if astrologer Joyce Jillson is to be believed. In 1980, she claimed the Reagan campaign hired her to cast horoscopes on all the Republican vice-presidential prospects. George Bush proved to be Ronald Reagan's best astrological match.

In July 1980, Jillson responded to a question from the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. Yes, she confirmed, she had been paid \$1,200 by the Reagan campaign to do horoscopes on eight vice-presidential candidates. The horoscopes were a rush order, she said, so Reagan could take them with him on a vacation to

Mexico, where he was pondering the selection of a running mate before the Republican National Convention. Of the eight, she found that Bush, a Gemini, would be the most compatible with the Aquarian Reagan.

When the story broke, Reagan campaign spokesman Lyn Nofziger denounced Jillson as a liar. She responded that she was shocked by the attack. "It wasn't my idea to put out this story," she told *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Warren Hinckle. "I never talk about my clients. I thought the Republicans had leaked it to help update their image."

And there the matter rested for eight years. Back in 1980, the idea that Ronald Reagan would use astrology in his decisions seemed like a zany satire in rather poor taste, something no respectable reporter would pursue further for fear of appearing zany himself.

Now that we know the Reagans consulted astrologers for even minor day-to-day decisions, Jillson's story takes on new importance. It's hard to imagine a couple so devoted to astrology *not* consulting it on such a crucial and delicate matter as picking a running mate. And Jillson's name did come up as one of the White House astrologers of the Reagan administration.

The implication is breathtaking. Here we may finally see George Bush's main qualification for a place in the Reagan White House, and thus why he is president today.

Alan M. MacRobert
Bedford, Mass.

Research on belief systems

Lewis Jones (*SI*, Fall 1988), in responding to my comments about his article on alternative therapies (*SI*, Spring 1988), appears to have missed the point. I suggested that because belief systems powerfully affect illness, wellness, and treatment of any brand, research on these topics should attempt to measure their effects. Lewis calls this "tampering with the results of double-blind trials." I call it designing ecologically valid research models

that account for maximal data.

Jones doesn't respond to the main thrust of my remarks, which is simply that current research, in not addressing the effects of individuals' belief systems, may be shining the flashlight in too small a corner of the darkness.

Martin Reiser, Director
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Koko criticisms

Years ago—when I was getting my humble B.A. in behavioral science at Rice University—a psychology professor solemnly warned me against “anthropomorphism,” the belief that animals have feelings like human beings. If the professor intended merely to caution against the naive attitude displayed by some animal lovers, then his comment was justified. However, the assumption that animals have *no* feelings similar to those of human beings is a fallacy, no more scientific than the belief that animals are “just like us.”

Emotions exist because they motivate certain kinds of behavior. For example, fear motivates one to flee or hide; anger causes aggressive behavior. Behaviors consistent with fear and anger can be observed in animals as well as humans. Also, one may observe the associated physiological processes: Frightened animals turn pale, angry ones flush. While we can never know exactly what animals feel, it is reasonable to believe that their subjective mental experience is at least partly similar to our own.

Now comes Robert Sheaffer, who resurrects the anthropomorphism fallacy in *Psychic Vibrations* (Fall 1988). He ridicules Penny Patterson for asserting that a gorilla could feel a need for motherhood. He seems to feel (assuming that his subjective mental experience is similar to mine) that this assertion is ridiculous on its face. I am unaware of any principle—other than the anthropomorphism fallacy—that would explain his irrational belief.

I am not able to pass judgment—pro or con—on Patterson's research. However, I do know that sexual ignorance is widespread among human beings, and Sheaffer makes an illogical leap by implying that the gorilla Koko is wiser. Also, sexual problems are by no means rare among humans who speak to each other perfectly well, and I don't see why things should be easier for gorillas—articulate or otherwise.

I would like to know what this sort of thing is doing in my beloved SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

Forrest Johnson
Goleta, Calif.

Robert Sheaffer's comments on gorillas Koko and Michael stirred memories of my afternoon with Michael. My daughter and I were in Palo Alto in the summer of 1978 to talk with Ann Southcombe. She had left the Cincinnati Zoo to join Penny Patterson at the trailer complex behind the Stanford Art Museum. Ann's responsibility was Michael, then a playful pup of 70 pounds or so. We decided to talk while taking Michael for a walk. I had the unique honor of holding the leash in a brief trip around the museum. What do you do when a playful gorilla climbs up your arm? I vaguely remember a playful gorilla nip on my thumb that drew no blood. Ann commented that Michael did not like other males; his mother had been killed when he was captured. After returning to the trailer, Ann demonstrated the limited signing vocabulary then possible. There was a flurry of fur and fingers. Ann laughed and explained that Michael had said he had been a very bad boy in attacking her friend! Our visit ended without meeting either Penny Patterson or Koko. I understand that Ann left a few years later for more practical animal-training elsewhere.

Sheaffer refers to Michael's “unpredictable and sometimes dangerous behavior [requiring] physical restraint.” I suspect the truth is that a mature male gorilla simply does not know his own strength. Gorillas are gentle animals that lack the desperate viciousness of many

carnivores. Sheaffer's a priori analysis concludes that Patterson's signing is fraudulent because Koko and Michael have not produced offspring. Is it possible that they perceive themselves as siblings and refuse incest? (Kibbutz roommates usually choose other mates.) What are the conditions of captivity? Zoo experience has shown that caged animals are less likely to mate than those who feel the freedom of open settings.

John H. Hubbard
Cincinnati, Ohio

About a year ago I subscribed to your publication in the hope that your contributors would, with open minds, address truly controversial issues. Instead, I find articles debunking poltergeists, orgone boxes, seers, the human face on Mars, and the like. It seem to me that people who believe in these things, if they read at all, would read the *National Enquirer*, not the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. So, who, I began to wonder, is your audience?

I found I didn't want to know when I read Robert Sheaffer's short piece in *Psychic Vibrations* on Koko the gorilla. Although animal behavior is one of the most exciting fields of science, with animal awareness and animal communication two of the most promising areas of inquiry, Sheaffer doesn't seem to know it, since he is still a combatant in the tedious and ancient ape-signing wars.

From the tone of Sheaffer's article, he seems to expect his readers to join him in sneering at something. At what? At the difficulties that have beset Patterson in maintaining her gorillas? At the fact that the public is interested in these gorillas? Should we be snickering at the inability of a captive male gorilla to mate? Hasn't Sheaffer heard of the difficulties in getting animals to mate in even the most advanced captive-breeding programs?

Better to stick with what you do well. Lay it on us about the tarot cards. Do they really tell the future?

Elizabeth Thomas
Peterborough, N.H.

Infection irony

I read your article "The China Syndrome" by Paul Kurtz (Fall 1988). In reference to one of the group contacting a bronchial infection, I too was amused that he was given antibiotics as well as snake bile. One hopes the infection was bacterial in origin rather than viral. All too often bronchial infections are due to viruses and are thus not treatable with antibiotics. Unfortunately there is such a demand from the lay public to treat everything with antibiotics that it is not unusual for the encumbered physician to prescribe them for infections they know cannot be helped by antibiotics.

If this was a viral infection, then the antibiotic and the snake bile were of equal efficacy.

Raymond P. Cloutier, M.D.
(No address given)

Anti-quackery actions

I take exception to the statement in Roger McKeown's letter (*SI*, Fall 1988) that Walter Clark's questioning of anti-quackery actions by government (*SI*, Spring 1988) "sounds like health-care libertarianism." The individual rights supported by libertarians do not include the "right" to fleece the public by quackery. The Statement of Principles of the Libertarian Party says that members "... support the prohibition of robbery, trespass, *fraud*, and *misrepresentation*..." (emphasis mine). The party platform advocates effective laws to these ends.

I think the letters by Clark, McKeown, and Trevor Danson in the same issue, commenting on the proper role of government in health care, raise a much larger issue, since each treats a major social theory (welfare statism, laissez-faire economics, and social Darwinism, respectively) in a skeptical light. I commend each of them for thus reminding us of the need to keep probing the social-scientific assumptions behind our political positions.

Stephen Brinich
Arlington, Va.

Take peanut before IQ test

With respect to the article "High-Flying Health Quackery" (*SI*, Summer 1988), and in a way related to the series of articles "CSICOP in China," I have transcribed below the interesting health claims to be found on a package of sugared peanuts served to me on a CAAC flight from Guilin to Beijing in May 1987:

MIRIXING Peanuts: "This crisp, tasty peanut is famous as 'bean fruit' abroad. Its main compositions: fresh peanuts, Kanbalkob, fine wheat flour, sutabiroozu and cane sugar. . . . This peanut contains Vitamin E and eight amino acids which [are] vital for [the] human body. It can lower cholesterol levels, prevent arteriosclerosis and heart disease, at the same time it has a function of raising children's intelligence and keeping human vitality."

Perhaps I should eat more of these.

Steven P. Levine
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Blasphemous creationists

I've read Jacobson's letter (*SI*, Fall 1988) about the absurdness of the creationist proposition. One may in reasoning not limit God's power, as Ockham already said. Only logic may be considered as binding for God too. Therefore it is not absurd to assume that God created the world together with its past 6,000 years ago, or maybe 6 seconds ago. Creationists maintain that there is evidence for this; in other words, God tried to forge a past, but He or She bungled it, leaving it for us to detect the flaws. An infinitely good and almighty and omniscient God doesn't leave any flaws. So we scientists are justified to assume that the universe is exactly as if it had existed ever since the Big Bang or what have you. It is the creationists who blasphemously are claiming that God is cheating us in a stupid way. After all, flaws that can be detected by lowly life forms like microbes, mice, and

men are below the the dignity of a competent Supreme Being. Of course, for a God created in the image of a Jimmy Swaggart or a Duane Gish, things might be entirely different.

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In defense of psychoanalysis

I would like to comment on Wendy Grossman's book review (*SI*, Fall 1988) of *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal* by Terence Hines. She supports his view of psychoanalysis as a therapy that "parallels those of other therapies more commonly accepted as pseudoscientific." While I would agree with some of the current criticisms of psychoanalysis, I think a complete white-washing of what it has to give to us is a great mistake.

Has Hines not read the studies that show psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy to be superior to placebo? Few psychologists, psychiatrists, or other mental-health workers would put *everything* Freud said in the same category as Uri Geller.

Psychoanalysis also depends heavily on other tools besides the interpretation of dreams, and not all denials of patients are taken as latent admittances. The most important cornerstones in psychoanalytic theory and practice (used also in most other forms of psychotherapies) are the existence of the unconscious and of the phenomenon of transference. Even if psychoanalysis has its flaws, one cannot deny its contributions to our understanding of the mind. Just as Newtonian physics cannot describe the universe vis-à-vis Einsteinian relativity, one cannot deny the basic contributions Newton made.

One does not need an elaborate interpretation of dreams to help a patient with unconscious transferences that cause trouble. More clearly, for instance, if someone grew up in a family where there was a lot of violence and has a timid

kind of character because unconsciously he fears the rest of the world may explode on him, the therapist can help him objectify his distortions and help him realize that to be more assertive will not bring on attack. The transference is the recreation of feelings from old relationships in new ones though there is no basis for it in reality. One does not need to resort to fancy psychoanalytic jargon, dream interpretation, or oedipal analysis to obviously and concretely see the importance of this example.

Grossman also alludes to "research that has found neurochemical origins for many 'disorders,' contradicting some major psychoanalytic theories." This is partially true. Some biological research into autism and schizophrenia has hit hard on old analytic theories. This still does not blow the importance of psychoanalytic principles off the map (remember Newton). If a patient's neurotransmitters go awry when he is stressed and he becomes depressed because of this chemical imbalance, it is true that his unconscious did not directly cause the depression; but in a susceptible patient, decreasing stress may prevent a relapse (see example above). In this case, neurochemical and psychoanalytic theory are not mutually

exclusive. A patient can take antidepressant medication and work through those distortions that may cause stress in psychotherapy.

Keeping in line with CSICOP's philosophy, we should not jump to dramatic conclusions based on incomplete evidence. The subtitle of Hines's book, "A Critical Examination of the Evidence," is parsimonious in teasing apart the pseudo from the science and avoiding that sinister all-or-none thinking.

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