

evolution rocks

Male mating behaviour hit a high note when music began to loosen libidos. Yasmin Ghahremani reports on evolutionary biologist Rob Brooks' new work in the area.

Elvis's pelvis and Jagger's swagger are legendary for their ability to elicit dreams, screams and underwear from female fans. But even less glamorous back-up men like Keith Richards thrilled the pants off groupies for decades. According to evolutionary biologist Rob Brooks, when rock music arrived, it allowed young people to express their sexuality and aggression more freely than previous music had – and it's largely men who exploited this. In fact, he claims rock is a cultural extension of biological male mating behaviour.

"Music stimulates parts of our brains that first evolved for other purposes ... It is especially important in courtship, and in learning to navigate the social transition to adulthood. It may be the most complex and sophisticated courtship display in the animal kingdom," he asserts.

"Music in the '50s and '60s became about men making music for women and also to assert their dominance over other men," says Brooks, who is director of the Evolution and Ecology Research Centre at UNSW.

That is a central tenet of his book, *Sex, Genes & Rock 'n' Roll*. The book provides an overview of how evolution interacts with social, cultural and economic phenomena, providing explanations for all kinds of behaviour, from excessive weight gain to polygamy and even death. Brooks draws on his own theories about the conflicting evolutionary interests of males and females, as well as his group's research

into how sex shapes the behaviour and life history of organisms such as crickets.

"What I'm hoping to do is broaden the range of things that people know about evolution beyond survival of the fittest and the selfish gene," says Brooks.

He chose rock music because he says it was the most important and egalitarian artistic development of the 20th century.

"... an evolutionary biologist starts from the assumption that things don't happen by themselves, especially things that dramatically increase your risk of dying, as rocking out certainly does. Anything as

popular, exciting, sexy, deadly and – most of all – as difficult to do well, needs an explanation," he says.

To explain the rock theory, Brooks describes the male reproductive agenda. Males and females are driven to pass on their genes, often by mating with more than one partner. However, men can impregnate many women in the nine months it takes a woman to bear a child. Men thus have more evolutionary incentive – and

opportunities – to seek out multiple partners. And while actors, businessmen and sports stars have used their

wealth and status to make sexual conquests, Brooks argues that rock stars have out-performed them all. Brooks believes rock music developed to help men and women seduce mates, but men hijacked it. Artists like Janis Joplin and Deborah Harry are the exception to the rule. Women today produce hits, but they tend to be pop or dance tunes. "That's because the aesthetic boundaries of rock were defined by an inherently male, blokey agenda," says Brooks.

There is a cost for rock stars, though. A study by the Liverpool John Moores University found that between 3 and 25 years after becoming famous, performers of the all-time Top 1,000 pop and rock albums were more than 1.7

times as likely to die as North Americans or Europeans of the same age.

Brooks cites the example of Rolling

Stones drummer

Brian Jones, who drowned at 27, yet still managed to father four children, each by a different mother.

That's not surprising to Brooks. He says "live fast, die young" is the mantra for males across many species. "When the chance emerges to become one of the very, very best you'll make a deal with the devil, whether that means that you discount the future by doing heroin or carrying guns around, sooner or later a lot of those men are just going to fall off the perch."

Sex, Genes & Rock 'n' Roll: How Evolution has Shaped the Modern World, is published by NewSouth Books.



The power of music ... The Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger