It is debatable, however, whether audiences obeyed their dictates. Acts that appealed to the body more than the brain coexisted with progressive (prog) rockers. Fans of David Bowie, an artist who combined elements from rock and R&B's many streams, took self-fashioning to new heights. Rock fans still danced, whether they swayed to the Grateful Dead or bobbed along to Suzi Quatro. A uniquely European manifestation of fan culture was Rockpalast, a West German TV production that was shown twice a year, starting in 1974, on the Eurovision network and that featured hours of live performances. No matter who was on the bill, rock fans from the Arctic circle to the Mediterranean held all-night watching parties lubricated by hash and alcohol—an "alternative" Europe to the one generated around the Eurovision Song Contest. Rockpalast's eclectic lineups exposed viewers to diverse artists across the rock and jazz spectrum. Its widespread popularity suggests that the rock audience had not become a closed church, so to say, after all.

Subcultures also became increasingly visible modes of musical engagement in the 1970s and 1980s. In the capitalist West, they emerged in response to the hegemony of the major record labels, changing social conditions (particularly postcolonial migrations and working-class fragmentation), and to the rising unemployment that accompanied the end of economic expansion after 1973. In subcultures, the most obsessed fans of a particular genre, who did not see their interests represented elsewhere, wove an all-encompassing way of life out of their passion. They originated from both the working class and the universities. They mixed materials from the dominant culture to produce new styles that challenged the mainstream (while unintentionally infusing it with new impulses). Participants congregated in urban spaces to socialize, share artifacts, and publicly display their allegiances through style. This was fandom as a creative activity, and adherents saw themselves as more enlightened than the masses who accepted what the music industry churned out. Some combined music with politics: punks in Europe (more so than the US) preached the rejection of a capitalist system that enriched the few and left the masses with no future. Young women used punk to put feminist values into action by critiquing women's sexual objectification, creating alternative styles, and playing music for themselves. Britain's ska subculture defied Thatcher-era racism, uniting white working-class youths in cities, like Coventry, with their peers from the African diaspora. In reaction, neo-Nazi subcultures used music to "sell" racism, attracting followers and raising funds through concerts. Heavy metal subcultures, in contrast, tended to be apolitical, though in post-Franco Spain, they used music to articulate local issues of economic inequality and social injustice. These admittedly selective examples remind us that, depending on context, intense engagement with music can serve higher goals—or no goal at all beyond a life devoted to music.