

Talk About Pop Music

A review of *Pop Music and the Press*, edited by Steve Jones. Temple University Press, 270 pages, \$19.95 (paper).

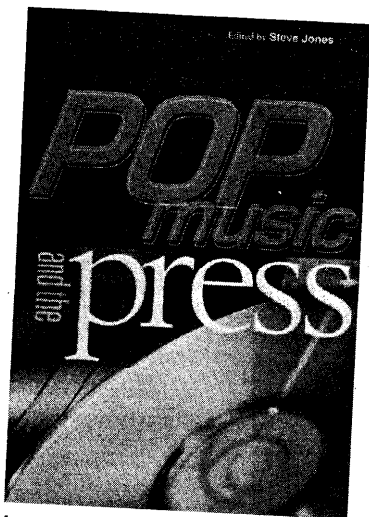
By DAN COOK

In the last chapter of the collection *Pop Music and the Press*, Chris Nelson urges rock critics to approach their chosen field with "brutal conviction" in the tradition of the late Lester Bangs. "Brutal conviction is the lifeblood that charges our innards and shoots sparks in our brains," he writes. "Without it, how can you proselytize? Because I do believe that proselytizing, preaching the gospel and spreading the good news of whatever your musical bag is, is ultimately what we rock writers are here for."

A few chapters earlier, in an essay called "Between Rock and a Hard Place," Kembrew McLeod is taking male rock critics to task for overusing metaphors of violence and aggression. While she doesn't specifically mention "brutal conviction" or sparks shooting into our brains, her point is clear. In a review of Hüsker Dü, for example, the band is given credit for its "savage purpose" and "almighty roar." A male critic praises The Rolling Stones for their "aggressive sexuality." And according to Bangs, Patti Smith's *Horses* "lunges with raw urgency" and has a "general primitivism [that] makes you realize you're a mammal again and glad for it, licking your chops."

"Rock 'n' roll is often correlated with masculinity," McLeod writes, "and the favorable adjectives and metaphors in these reviews invoke characteristics traditionally associated with men."

The gender issues that McLeod and others in *Pop Music* address represent a key contradiction in the world of rock criticism. Much of what goes under the heading of "rock" — be it The Rolling Stones, The Sex Pistols or Tool — is aggressive music, written by and often for a mostly male audience. It is also, written about mostly by men: The ranks of rock critics have always been, and continue to be, dominated by men. But even if you accept the proposition that testosterone will always have a disproportionate role in rock and in rock criticism — which might or might not be true — male critics



have often needlessly inflamed resentment through their treatment of female musicians. Several articles in *Pop Music* document the tendency of male critics to write more about the clothes, bodies and attitudes of female musicians than their music, as well as the critics' enduring insistence on treating female musicians as if they were an anomaly. Meanwhile, standing in stark contrast to the male-dominated reality of rock criticism is rock as an ideology, which once espoused values like egalitarianism and liberation — presumably for women as well as men.

Nelson's and McLeod's articles are fairly representative of those collected in *Pop Music and the Press*, all of which illustrate contradictions inherent in writing about rock music and apply concrete (i.e., academic) analysis to the process of understanding these contradictions.


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include historical issues, such as how rock journalism emerged and how its history is intertwined with that of "new journalism"; racial issues, including hip-hop journalism and its often uneasy relationship to the broader world of rock and pop journalism; economic issues, such as how rock journalism is embedded within both the music industry and the publishing industry; sociological issues, including how rock journalism serves and relates to its audience; and aesthetic and theoretical issues, such as how cultural fields are constructed.

If all this sounds a bit high and mighty for rock 'n' roll — well, editor Steve Jones also pondered that issue. Asking himself at the outset whether turning rock criticism into an academic subject would spell its death knell, he concluded: "[P]lenty of rock critics take their cues from academic work, so why not? And if Robert Christgau of the *Village Voice* is the 'dean of rock critics,' surely there is room for a professor, or perhaps even a full department, in the field."

I guess that's for universities to decide. Anyway, Jones is certainly not the first person to write about rock as an academic subject. Simon Frith, who is also included here, is one of several writers (Greil Marcus is another) who have paved the way for the acceptance of rock journalism as a legitimate subject for serious study. What Jones is doing is trying to further bridge the gap between rock journalism and the academic study of popular culture.

And there is plenty in the world of rock journalism to be studied. In her essay "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," McLeod delineates criteria by which rock critics typically make judgements, and her analysis is not only dead-on but also points to other areas of tension. Describing something as "soft," for example, is typically a way

of dismissing it, as is calling it "slick," "bland" or "commercial." Conversely, rock music is often praised with words like "raw," "serious" and "traditional," or for demonstrating "self-expression" or "simplicity." "Simplicity" used as a compliment? Yes, because simplicity — like rawness and traditionalism — is related to authenticity, a key concept underpinning most rock criticism, even if it is only infrequently mentioned explicitly.

The concept of authenticity underlies another vexing question in rock writing: the issue of "pop" versus "rock." While *Pop Music and the Press* is focused on rock criticism, it uses the word "pop" in its title. Why? Probably because whereas rock was once a relatively easily discernable form of music that contrasted sharply with the innocuous radio hits that characterized "pop" in the 1960s, it is now an incredibly nebulous subset within a broader world of pop music. In other words, it's not that easy to differentiate between rock and pop, and pop is the term that can be applied more broadly. To take a concrete example, as far as radio airplay is concerned, modern rock is less its own genre than simply a farm league for pop stations. Once an alt-rock band has sufficiently proven its pop appeal on WARQ and "rock" stations like it around the country, then it is ready for the big leagues — mass-market pop stations like WNOK.

In her essay "Taking Country Music Seriously," Joli Jensen admonishes critics not to take the easy way out on these questions of commercialism, crossover and mass audience. "When we tell various versions of how the Forces of Commerce

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