

## **The Intro**

### *Popular Music, Media, and the Written Word*

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**W**hen I began thinking about writing, collecting, and commissioning essays about music criticism, I wondered whether I might feel like Charlie Brown in *Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown!* When he puts a single ornament on the lonesome, fragile Christmas tree he finds, it falls over. Charlie Brown throws his hands up in the air and says, “Augh! I’ve killed it!” I wondered if making rock criticism an academic subject might do something of the same. But of course plenty 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.

It was among friends, colleagues, critics, and fellow students that the academic origins of my interest in popular music first took on clarity. However, from the conversations I had with them, it became clear that little existed in the way of systematic study of popular-music criticism as it has evolved since the 1960s in the press. Little understanding of its history exists among many popular-music critics either. Numerous academic studies of popular music are published each year, and there are several scholarly journals that serve as forums for popular-music scholars. Yet little has been published about popular-music criticism, in popular-music scholarship or in journalism and mass communication scholarship. Nor can

one find much context in the works of critics themselves. Roy Shuker noted the same in his book *Key Concepts in Popular Music*: “There has been little critical analysis of how these publications construct popular music and influence the reception of genres and performers” (1998, 195). That this is so is even more surprising given the list of print media in which one can find popular-music criticism. Shuker provides a comprehensive list: “Lifestyle magazines with major music coverage, music trade papers, and weekly and monthly consumer magazines devoted to popular music, or particular genres within [it]. In addition to these are privately published fanzines. . . . There is also a variety of book-length writing on popular music . . . [and] the ‘quickie’ publications aiming to cash in on the latest pop sensation” (195–96).

When one also considers the variety of Internet media, from newsgroups and chat rooms to web sites, in which one can find writing about popular music, the dearth of scholarship is still more surprising.

Journalism historians seem to have overlooked even the publications that popular-music critics wrote for, such as *Crawdaddy!*, *Creem*, *Musician*, *Spin*, and *Trouser Press* (to name the well-known ones), save for a handful of research articles on *Rolling Stone* magazine (the best history of *Rolling Stone* is still Draper 1990). But although histories of *Rolling Stone* offer glimpses into the publishing industry and the counterculture, popular-music criticism itself has largely been neglected as a site for academic study. Only Abe Peck’s *Uncovering the Sixties* (1985), a history of the underground press in that decade, situates within the framework of cultural and political debate the rise of magazines that catered to a rock audience. Indeed, the editorial *raison d’être* of many underground periodicals (then and now) is to offer an audience published music criticism. Underground periodicals have been particularly tied to popular-music criticism, because such periodicals served (and continue to serve, by way of fanzines both online and print) as a kind of “farm league” for many journalists. Such periodicals remain the catalyst for many who subsequently choose reporting and editing in the mainstream or underground press as a career.

This collection of essays focuses on popular music since the 1950s, largely because it is from that point on that one begins to see jazz and pop criticism doing more than analyze music. That writing carried the seeds of a postwar U.S. cultural criticism based on the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the baby-boom generation. This criticism essentially recovered the aesthetic and cultural values of postwar youth and asserted the validity of their experience. Taking motion pictures, art, and music as their texts, critics helped blast a hole through the postwar social hardening of the 1950s—as well as through the journalistic conventions that the New Journalism came to question.

These essays focus on criticism of popular-music styles denoted by terms such as “rock,” “rock and roll,” “rap,” “hip-hop,” “rhythm ’n’ blues,” and “pop.” Nevertheless, for the most part this book denotes those who write about these styles as, interchangeably, “rock critics” or “music critics.” Before the music itself reaches a wide audience, such criticism is published almost exclusively in fanzines and the underground press, and only later does it appear in the mainstream press. In the 1950s and 1960s other journalistic space for criticism simply did not exist for those wishing to write about popular music. In turn, the underground press owes some of its life (and circulation) to its many pages of popular-music criticism.

Moreover, this collection almost exclusively considers English-language popular-music criticism. It focuses on its publication in the United States and the United Kingdom and for the most part excludes trade publications. It also excludes the “musician’s magazines” that arose primarily in the 1980s oriented toward guitar players, keyboard players, and music technology, which Paul Théberge (1997) analyzed in his book *Any Sound You Can Imagine*. It will be important to examine the impact of English-language criticism in other countries. Bruce Johnson (1998) has begun such work in analyses of Australian jazz and its coverage in the press. As an example of how important such work might be, all one need do is turn to Jason Toynbee’s 1993 article that examines the music press in Britain: “[Critic Charles Shaar] Murray was able to import highbrow methods [of criticism] because he found a language that was a credible complement to rock itself. This was partly a question of the judicious use of Americanisms which sounded both hip and hard-boiled; ‘goddam’ was a favourite. But it was also to do with a sentence structure out of Hemingway via the New Journalism, where irregular clusters of short sentences broke up much longer strings of subordinate clauses” (1993, 291). One reason for Murray’s use of language is that in the 1970s, the U.K.’s *New Musical Express* weekly forged an agreement with U.S.-based *Creem* magazine to reprint articles, and at the time some of rock criticism’s most notable writers (including Lester Bangs) were on *Creem*’s staff (DeRogatis 2000b, 114).

Much important work remains to be done. As important as industrial and writerly relationships are, so is the influence of language, and thus examining the development of popular-music criticism in languages other than English should prove instructive. I hope that this collection can help serve as a foundation from which such work can proceed. While some of the contributors are themselves musicians and can provide some perspective from that vantage, a general overview of criticism from the musicians’ perspective will also be of great interest, as will examination of criticism across a wide variety of musical styles and forms.

Further, rock critics regularly critique one another's work, and some do so in the pages of this book, but despite a spate of recent anthologies that collect a handful of critics' work, we know little with regard to their learning and knowledge about writing.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to assess directly the impact a critic has on sales of recordings and concert tickets. Shuker noted that "there is general agreement that rock critics don't exercise as much influence on consumers as, say, literary or drama critics" (1994, 93). One reason, as Shuker claimed, is that hearing music has greater impact than reading about it, and thus those who control airplay likely have greater influence on consumers. It may also be that the investments of time and money required for engagement with most literature and drama, and the concomitant lack of popular access and distribution (one rarely sees or hears, for instance, passages from *Death of a Salesman* mass mediated), create a greater interest in "preview" material consumers can use to guide their purchases. Some critics, most notably Robert Christgau, originator of the "consumer guide" approach to pop-music reviews, provide just such a service, and it is likely that there is greater consumer interest in it now than in the 1970s and 1980s, if only due to the increased variety and amount of music available in all media. An important future undertaking will be to examine the critical discourse in trade publications and to determine the differences and similarities to that discourse in consumer publications as a way to assess the degree to which music criticism is a gatekeeper (Shuker 1998, 199; Toynbee 1993, 290).

Critics' own understanding of their role in relation to consumers is important to assess, and it is related to the professionalization of the music critic (and in turn of the journalist). Lester Bangs gave us his version of what it takes to be a rock critic, fortunately reprinted in Jim DeRogatis's Bangs biography *Let It Blurt* (2000a), including a MadLibs-like template for an "original record review." DeRogatis gives us some insight into the professionalization of rock criticism when he writes about the rock critic conferences and associations and the music journalism awards, but most of all when he writes about Bangs's canonization and the history of *Creem*. It is important to remember that critics do unto one another as they do to others. They read and criticize (though rarely in print) one another and one another's writing and tastes in music, and most cling to a variety of elitist, though regularly shifting, beliefs, such as whether it is better to be a critic for a fanzine, magazine, or a newspaper.

In truth, we know very little about critics' own values beyond those that relate to music itself. What music critics and journalists believe their work to be bears scrutiny. In a 1990 article for the *Washington Journalism Review*, Jory Farr, popular-music critic at a daily newspaper in California, wrote:

Most of my weeks go by in a blur. When I'm not listening to the dozens of records and tapes that I get in the mail each week—everything from zouk and zydeco to samba and jazz—I'm setting up interviews, knocking out local entertainment stories, doing background research for larger pieces, arranging photo shoots or dealing with promoters. . . . I'm frequently exposed to music that's uncharted territory for me. And some weeks . . . I wonder if I haven't made a vocational mistake. Chronic fatigue and glamour just don't mix well.

I do get free tickets to the best shows (usually excellent seats) and free records and CDs. And whenever I'm feeling stressed, I remind myself that I'm not writing 10 inches on the new water board member, but on something I really love. Besides, as a columnist and critic I have a rare luxury in daily journalism: the freedom to write creatively.

Most of my colleagues agree, however, that their jobs are still the stuff of myth. Few readers—or even reporters—understand the rigors of the pop music critic's beat or its key role in American culture. (49–50)

Farr interviews several other music critics and the result is a most informative examination of the profession. Robert Wyatt and Geoffrey Hull conducted a survey of popular-music critics and their editors in the late 1980s and found that a

composite image of the “average” American music critic begins to emerge. That critic is, in all probability, a well-educated male in his 30s with about 10 years' experience covering music. He has at least a bachelor's degree with perhaps even some graduate work . . . his tastes do not change dramatically whether he works for a small daily in a rural area, a prestigious metropolitan newspaper or a slick national magazine. This composite critic also does not attribute high aesthetic and philosophical functions to music but understands its primary functions to include diversion, escape and companionship.

The music critic writes far more positive reviews than negative reviews. Perhaps this finding indicates that music critics, because of the popular nature of their chosen art form, are unaccustomed to employing stringent critical standards. Or perhaps this paucity of negative reviews is a reflection of the fact that . . . music critics have great discretion in choosing what to review. (1988, 20–21)

Wyatt and Hull discuss briefly the ethics of critics at newspapers in this survey and a 1990 article, but no studies exist that focus exclusively on the ethical dimension of popular-music criticism. Still, Farr's and Wyatt and Hull's efforts give us at least a glimpse into the wealth of information that can be gleaned from systematic study of popular-music critics and their profession.

Interestingly, these writers did not delve into the racial backgrounds of music critics. It is not until rap music leads to the development of publications devoted to its coverage (and to coverage of other African Amer-

ican musical forms) that black music critics begin to be widely heard and noticed. Criticism and reporting on jazz, R&B, soul, Motown, and numerous other genres established by black musicians or in which black musicians predominate was most often written by whites. And, as Holly Kruse, Brenda Johnson-Grau, and others in this book observe, women too have been excluded from the ranks of critics.

The demographic characteristics of music critics can provide insight. So can the ethics of popular-music criticism. Both are topics among many that can engage questions of the professionalization of criticism and connect it to analyses of popular-music criticism as industrial practice, with its own routines and expectations as a media industry embedded in another industry (the music business). As Shuker noted: "The music press and critics are not, at least directly, vertically integrated into the music industry. . . . A sense of distance is thereby maintained, while at the same time the need of the industry to constantly sell new images, styles, and product is met" (1998, 200).

However, as I found in a study of advertiser influence on music magazines (Jones 1993), *both* the music and publishing industries need one another and need to "sell new images, styles, and product." Very little research into their symbiotic relationship has been done. One of the best, and longest, studies of the popular-music press notes similarities between the popular-music industry and "practices in other industries more commonly called culture industries such as book publishing and film making" (Stratton 1982, 269). It is all the more imperative that we continue research in this vein for, as Shuker claimed, the music press is one of the few domains of media that has not been vertically integrated into the music industry and larger media industries.

In a sense, music criticism itself has become industrialized. At the level of content, Mark Evans, in a study of album reviews in Australian rock magazines, found that album reviews "are constituted by fundamental elements that can be individually identified . . . lyrical analysis, inter-artist comparison, artist background and musical analysis (1998, 49). At an institutional level, Mark Fenster noted well before he wrote the essay for this collection that "the music press has become conventionalized and based upon the same kinds of industrial structures" as the music industry (1989, 16). One writer even went so far as to claim that rock critics "are the bush league scouts for the process that turns music into money" (Lyons 1989, 27). Some critics have, in fact, gone on to work for record companies full-time, while others are on their payrolls only indirectly. In some ways, then, to understand popular-music criticism fully we need to delve well beyond the writing of it. Shuker noted that music magazines have "become part of a general magazine culture" but also spied an evolution away from covering music alone toward be-

coming “a guide to lifestyle, especially leisure consumption” (1994, 92). Just as popular music itself has penetrated virtually all media forms, the vehicles in which one finds popular-music criticism have brought added attention to the variety of media with which music fans engage. Shuker’s analysis provides a particularly trenchant critique of the interplay of industry, consumerism, and nostalgia. But it is important not to underplay the significance of criticism itself, but to theorize the practice of popular-music criticism as creative work when it comes to writing it *and* to reading it.<sup>1</sup> The contributors to this collection occupy themselves with just such concerns.

## Organization

Though this book does not reprint any critic’s writing, it shares a few idiosyncrasies with a book that does, *The Penguin Book of Rock & Roll Writing* (Heylin 1992). Will you find mention of your favorite critic? Maybe, maybe not. Some of the “big names” appear, like Lester Bangs and Robert Christgau, but some are hard to find—among them, Dave Marsh, Jon Landau, Jon Savage, Joe Carducci, Richard Meltzer, Nick Tosches, and Jules Siegel. I’d like to believe they are in here between the lines, as are references to smaller magazines and fanzines like *Maximum Rock & Roll* and *OP*. All have made a contribution, whether it is a clearly visible one or not. The writers, articles, and publications named in the book are largely cited as examples and illustrations; the goal has not been to create a hall of fame (or museum, or “project”).

The book is divided into three sections. The first examines the institutions and history of popular-music criticism. The essay Kevin Featherly and I wrote situates its practice in the United States within the social context and structure of the underground press in the 1960s and 1970s. Gestur Gudmundsson, Ulf Lindberg, Morten Michelsen, and Hans Weisethaunet draw on a broad range of humanist and sociological theories to illustrate and explain three turning points in popular-music criticism’s development (discursive establishment, discursive transition, and diversification). The authors are an Icelandic sociologist, a Norwegian ethnomusicologist, a Swedish literature expert, and a Danish musicologist; they examine popular-music criticism in Nordic countries and provide a much-needed non-Anglo perspective on criticism. Jeff Chang historicizes and locates rap and hip-hop criticism in the larger media context, taking into account the role new media are playing in its development. The section’s last essay, by Robert Ray, argues against the received wisdom that popular-music criticism adheres to an implicit legitimation of the music industry’s commercial practices, noting that the most important rock critics have been attentive to the pitfalls of canonization and

made constant efforts to acknowledge diverse artists and genres. Their standards are often openly subjective, and they have foregrounded the contingency of musical and aesthetic value long before it was fashionable among academic critics.

Mark Fenster's chapter opens the next section, one geared toward examining the discourses within and about popular-music criticism. Fenster places rock criticism within the institutional, economic, and ideological structures of the practices of contemporary rock music. His central argument is that critics and music journalism as a whole work within the dominating economic structures of the music industry and within the various cultural discourses of U.S. rock culture. Kembrew McLeod's essay examines the role of discourse in reproducing institutional social relations, with special attention to McLeod's own "dual citizenship" as music critic and academic author. Martin Cloonan's chapter traces the discursive history of the British press and its engagement with popular music. Of particular interest is Cloonan's illustration of the British press's shift from a position that opposed rock and roll to one that accommodates and appreciates it. Cloonan shows that criticism is increasingly incorporated into a broad range of contemporary periodicals (most notably in "lifestyle" magazines) and serves a wider audience than ever—mirroring the diffusion of popular music across media. Holly Kruse analyzes the ways popular-music criticism provides a discursive positioning by which music fans (and nonfans) situate themselves in relation to various genres, artists, and songs. The ubiquity of popular-music criticism, she argues, means that the ways in which it articulates gender can have a significant impact on how people are socialized into popular music. McLeod's examination of the discourses of authenticity in hip-hop criticism closes the section, underlining the tensions between fans, critics, and culture.

The book's third section consists of case studies of particular discursive formations in popular-music criticism. Thom Swiss examines the interplay of critical, fan, and artist discourses in the construction of Jewel as both a pop star and a poet. His essay illuminates the connections between multiple critical discourses and social structures and media, making it an excellent jumping-off point for others interested in unraveling the intertwining of popular music, criticism, mediation, authenticity, and representation. Joli Jensen's essay focuses on the coverage of country music in the mainstream press when SoundScan, the new retail scanning, reporting, and charting system, revealed that country music was outselling rock. It analyzes and elucidates the surprise, backpedaling, and attempts to "welcome" the popularity of country, even as it was being denigrated. Brenda Johnson-Grau shows us in her essay that the pres-

ence of women in popular music has been continual and constant. Yet, as she demonstrates, both the national and the music media portray the contributions of women as marginal and extraordinary, creating a notion that the presence of women in rock was unusual—that rock is an exclusively male preserve. Sharon Mazzarella and Timoth Matyjewicz provide a case study of the coverage of popular music in the press and focus on the media’s use of the deaths of John Lennon, Jerry Garcia, Kurt Cobain, and Tupac Shakur to report on youth culture in addition to music.

### **Culture, Academia, and Journalism**

Indeed, the links between popular music and youth that are forged in the places inhabited by musicians and young people are milled in the discursive spaces of popular-music criticism. Charles Hamm made an important connection between the two when he noted that rock journalism’s focus “was on popular music as a manifestation of the culture of young people, . . . seen not as a malignancy requiring a cure but rather as a potential cure for a malignant society, with music occupying a central position in their culture” (1995, 22).

But an even more important connection, one Hamm only indirectly makes, is the one between academic critics and popular-music critics, between intellectuals and journalists. Though DeRogatis noted four “camps” of rock writers—academics, historians, gossips, and “unruly, contentious . . . Noise Boys” (2000, 89)—it is disingenuous of him to write that “two camps dominate rock criticism today: the two-thumbs-up consumer-guide careerists who treat rock ’n’ roll as mere entertainment, and the academics who drain it of all the joy and fury” (xvi). Writers often have one foot in each camp, or migrate between the two. And what are we to make of critics who moonlight as musicians (and vice versa)? Lester Bangs himself occupied that territory, as do many others. Where might their camp be, and is the campfire still burning there?

It should not be surprising that youth culture is central to popular-music criticism, just as it should not be surprising that there is crossover between critics and musicians. All of these groups engage in critical discourse in one way or another. However, as Hamm points out, for academics youth culture was also central to “sociology in the decade following the end of World War II, when the study of youth behavior was a popular theme in that discipline” (1995, 21). The connections between academic critics and popular-music critics form a recurring theme throughout this book. Simon Frith has even claimed that “popular music is a solution, a ritualized resistance, not to the problems of being young and poor and proletarian but to the problems of being an intellectual”

(1992, 179). If Frith is even partly correct, then it should be no surprise that popular-music criticism, an expression and discourse surrounding and about popular music, will attract the attention of other intellectuals.

Angela McRobbie noted that by the early 1970s “there were a number of . . . forces which encouraged young journalists . . . to explore popular culture as a more general form: a recognition, for example, that pop music . . . could no longer be considered in isolation” (1988, xiii). Developments in several academic fields, such as sociology, communication, and media studies, at around the same time brought some scholarly attention to popular culture. By the 1980s it was not hard to see that in some cases McRobbie’s assertion was twisted around by those who saw in popular music a microcosmic vantage from which to study youth culture. But what is most interesting is McRobbie’s observation that “while pop journalism has moved towards a more serious mode, academic writing has, to some extent, shifted towards a lighter, more essayistic, style” (xvii). As I explained in an analysis of the controversy surrounding publication of an academic book about Madonna, journalists and academics now jointly occupy many discursive spaces (Jones 1997). Each group continues to hold its piece of ground, and sometimes the contestations make for interesting reading. But what is more significant than the struggles for symbolic turf is that each has found a public sphere, a “forum . . . where issues could be ventilated, speculations workshopped, where almost any opinion could gain a hearing,” as Bruce Johnson noted in a history of Australian jazz publications (1998, 11).

That popular-music criticism continues to matter is evident simply from the 1998 publication of the “Rock Critical List,” an anonymous rant about New York pop music critics and the *Village Voice*’s annual Pazz & Jop critics’ poll, or the attack in 1998 on *Blaze* magazine editor-in-chief Jesse Washington for information revealed in a review of a rap record (and, it was speculated, for the review’s lukewarm praise).<sup>2</sup> Thus, though there may be a limited supply of symbolic material over which competing interests may struggle (see chapter 1), the intensity of the struggle will tend to make the supply seem enormous (if not limitless); more importantly, struggle itself is a means by which such material is kept circulating and therefore in supply. The development of new media by way of the Internet, from the interpersonal to the mass (including the many combinations and permutations of those), has meant that what Johnson terms a “rippling out” of the influence of music criticism takes place within new spatial and temporal configurations.<sup>3</sup> Not only the Internet but also multimedia technologies are spawning new vehicles through which critical discourse takes place. *Launch* is a CD-R publication, for instance, and *Circuit* is published on DVD. Taking the concept initiated by

the publishing of sheet music in periodicals and later by “flexi-discs” inserted into magazines, these media combine written criticism with musical examples, interviews, video footage, and entire songs. Most are hypertextual in design, and it is much too early to know the consequences such publications may have on popular-music criticism.

But it is not too early to note that new media will not likely drive music critics to extinction. They might create greater demand for music criticism, or they might be a proving ground for aspiring music critics. Look at the Usenet newsgroups, mailing lists, chat rooms, and web sites where the boundaries between fans and critics are blurred as never before. Rock critic Gina Arnold has gone so far as to write, in “Rock Lit Lite” in the *San Jose Metro* for 30 November 1999, that “nowadays, serious readers of rock lit tend to eschew the factual prose of *Rolling Stone* and the pretentious attitudinizing of *Spin*, preferring instead to troll for information about new music in the infinitely less literate areas of fanzines, the Internet or college radio” (1999, 23).

Yet in many cases, those areas are quite literate, and they may be where the function of music criticism as a public forum is being fulfilled, and we may be so early in the development of these forums that we have difficulty discerning their activities and roles. Kallioniemi noted that “the importance of interaction between writers and readers is gradually growing because of the introduction of internet-versions of most magazines” (1998, 25). According to Thomas Valovic:

The ambiguity of roles found in the on-line environment . . . has puzzling implications for journalists. In an on-line venue, is a reporter a private citizen or a journalist?

There is a notion in Internet culture that “everyone on the Net is a reporter.” Yet as reporters become more attuned to listening to their readers, a curious kind of role reversal is suggested: Reporters do the listening and readers do the reporting. (1995, 119–20)

The ambiguity about which Valovic writes may do more than puzzle us; it may be cause for concern, or even for anger. As Jim DeRogatis reported in “Hitting Some Low Notes” in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 31 October 1999, such was the case after RCA Records launched a campaign to hype Christina Aguilera by hiring college students to populate newsgroups and chat rooms. The net.shills went so far as to encourage others online to request Aguilera’s music on radio and MTV.

When Shuker noted the importance of the music press in melding music, style, and news to create fan communities, he added that “the ideological role of the rock press in constructing a sense of community and in maintaining a critical distance from the music companies had already

become muted by the early 1980s (1994, 92; see also Mitchell and Shuker 1998). It is not clear from Shuker's analysis whether one should understand the formation of community from an industrial perspective (that relates it to the publishing and music industries' desire to create markets) or from a perspective rooted in literary criticism (that sees each act of reading criticism as creating an interpretive community). In some sense the music press provided an interactive environment for fans, insofar as readers could position themselves within the multiple discourses therein. But it is also important to consider the *integrative* aspect of engagement with the music press, the engagement in a common and regular practice (of going to the newsstand each week or month, or of subscribing and receiving a publication in the mail). Greater interaction is easily spotted in the new media; the multitude of chat rooms, newsgroups, listservs, and web pages attests to it. But its integrative aspect is more difficult to spot, though it should be of great interest, for it is more closely tied to the routines associated with popular-music consumption. It is a realm of activity quite closely articulated with fandom, with "collecting," and now with mp3 and other digital audio formats available online. The Napster mp3 file-sharing software, for instance, provides interfaces for uploading and downloading music *and* a bulletin board for discussion among users. Aspects of interaction themselves thus become integrated as the practices of popular-music fandom converge in and through new media and technology.

We cannot yet know how new media will serve to develop another generation of critics, nor what kind of critics it may develop; our notion of "critic" may need modifying. As it is, we know little about the development of critics in general. Despite one musician's utterance in the film *Almost Famous* that its protagonist was "never a person, he was a journalist," one of the great motivations of many critics is the desire to "build" a group of fans who see alike, because, as Lester Bangs's character puts it, "the only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else who isn't cool." And one of the great frustrations is being unable to do so for any length of time, if ever.

My own story of how I came to be a music critic is probably rather typical (and just as typical is the way I eventually ceased being one). Few people set out on a career path toward music criticism. Fewer still are set on that path by parents, teachers, career counselors, job ads, or any of the myriad ways one typically finds a livelihood. Most become music critics due to a connection with music, be they musicians, students of music, scholars, or fans, and due to a concomitant and usually serendipitous connection to someone who can offer an outlet for their writing. Indeed, it seems as if many music critics do not realize they are music critics until they begin getting hate mail from disgruntled musicians and

fans. None I am aware of has a degree in music criticism (though of course many do not have a journalism degree or a degree in music and have suffered no ill consequence as a result). Most “studied” music criticism by reading all of it they could get their hands on.

And yet, just a few weeks before I finished the final draft of this manuscript, a young undergraduate student stopped by my office to tell me that she wanted to become a music critic. I struggled only for a moment over whether her interest in music was a pure one, or whether she was just seeking glamour, access, and free records. But there is no such thing as “pure” rock criticism; there never was and never will be. Rock criticism is no more or less “pure” than the music it takes as its subject. My advice to her was to set to writing, with the thought that she can thereby gain the knowledge and skills for turning out publishable music criticism. Her interest, however, turned out to be in learning how to make a career of it, determining whether it was a way to make a living. Maybe, just maybe, popular-music criticism has reached the point at which its professionalization is complete. My hope, however, is that it also will continue to attempt “to make us see things differently,” to borrow from Frith and Savage’s critique of populism (1997, 16), for I could see in that student’s eyes that if she was mercenary about anything, it was about having her voice heard in the debate about what music can mean in her, and our, life.

## Notes

1. Unless one counts various radio and television talk shows or news shows on which critics may appear, or the “rate-a-record” phenomenon that seems to recur every dozen or so years on a music-oriented television program, there are few examples of critics taking to media other than print. A notable exception is *Sound Opinions* on WXRT-FM radio in Chicago. This weekly talk show, hosted by critics Jim DeRogatis of the Chicago *Sun-Times* and Greg Kot of the Chicago *Tribune*, often features conversations with other critics, reviews of concerts and albums, and interviews with musicians.

2. The “list” was e-mailed anonymously to several critics, commented on in the *Village Voice*, then published online in *Spin* at <http://www.spin.com/poplife/koolthing/art%2D19990326%2Dkool1/page2.html>. Its pseudonymous author, JoJo Dancer, states: “So, in lieu of yet another over-analyzed, self-serving, year-end wankorama (that would be the Pazz & Jop; and it’s Lauryn Hill best album, Aaliyah best single, Nuggets best reissue, if you need to care), we’d like to announce our first annual ROCK CRITICAL LIST, a self-serving circle jerk/séance on the grinding, but not irreversible, decline of POP MUSIC JOURNALISM.”

3. The same is true, of course, of music. For an examination of the Internet’s consequences for popular music see Jones 2000, where many of the issues set forth hold true for popular-music criticism and discourse.

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