

CONTINUUM ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
POPULAR MUSIC  
OF THE WORLD



VOLUME I  
MEDIA, INDUSTRY AND SOCIETY



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VOLUME I:  
MEDIA, INDUSTRY AND SOCIETY

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## Journalistic Practises

### Introduction

Music journalism can be defined as the practise of reporting or writing about music for publication in specialist or nonspecialist print media, including the music press, life-style magazines, newspapers, biographies and histories. Music journalism has been important in the negotiation and ascription of popular music meanings, as well as integral to the marketing of popular music. Because the subject of such journalism is music, a distinction can be drawn between music journalism and general journalistic practise. Hence, music journalists generally work within a particular discourse of criticism, adhering to certain stylistic conventions and employing common critical criteria. The music journalist's expertise is in capturing the essence of music, the atmosphere of performance, and building the public image of a star or act. The method of documentation informs the way in which music has been judged and valued.

### Early Conventions

Music journalism and specialist music publications have existed in some form since the nineteenth century. Until the 1960s, journalism relating to pop and rock 'n' roll tended to be fairly prosaic. The pieces were largely factual and statistical, and made little use of emotive or atmospheric language or detailed scene-setting. Reviews of live and recorded music were generally dryly descriptive (detailing the songs played, the group members and so on), and judged performance in terms of technical or generic competence and audience reaction. Interviews recounted plainly the factual details of an artist's career or personal life. For example, the tone of a review of a live concert, printed in the weekly UK publication *Melody Maker* in 1957, is straightforward, with an unanimated relaying of facts: 'The Deep River Boys came to Glasgow Empire for the thirteenth time this week and received a well-deserved crescendo of applause' (Innes 1957, 9).

This concentration on entertainment value and proficiency was fairly typical of popular music criticism of the time. However, the critical emphasis in 1950s coverage of other genres, such as folk and jazz, was somewhat different. Journalism that addressed the folk revival, in journals such as *Sing Out!* (United States) and *Sing* (United Kingdom), attempted to contextualize the music



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within the ideological framework of the movement. As in the case of contemporary jazz journalists, such as the US commentator Nat Hentoff, the writing in these publications was grounded in analysis that reflected on the music's social uses, history and relationship to tradition – all traits that would be repeated in later rock journalism.

#### The New Journalism

From the mid-1960s onward, music journalism increasingly revealed the profound influence of the emerging New Journalism movement. Spearheaded by color-supplement and magazine writers such as Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson and novelists such as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, the New Journalism undertook to take journalism out of the realm of mere 'dry' reporting of facts by utilizing many of the stylistic components of fiction. Its conventions had an important influence on style and content, as well as on the construction of the image of the journalist within music (especially rock) journalism. Stylistic traits pioneered by the new journalists, such as scene-by-scene construction, third-person point of view, recording of everyday detail and the inclusion of the persona of the journalist within the text, were appropriated by US and UK music critics from the end of the 1960s. The fact that many new journalists explicitly created a new cultural agenda that treated popular culture as worthy of serious analysis has also been attributed to the influence of the New Journalism. For example, Tom Wolfe, writing in 1966, makes clear that the subject matter of much of his writing constitutes a definite shift in aesthetic boundaries:

The educated classes, the people who grow up to control visual and printed communication media, are all plugged into what is ... an ancient, aristocratic aesthetic. The Jerk, the Monkey and rock music still seem beneath serious consideration. Yet all these rancid people are creating new styles all the time and changing the life of the whole country in ways that nobody even seems to bother to record, much less analyse. (Wolfe 1981, 12)

Significantly, this evolution in writing style occurred at the same time as mainstream rock music began to take itself more seriously, with the incorporation of art and folk aesthetics into the genre. Subsequent journalistic criticism began to reflect and reinforce this position.

#### The Underground Press

Parallel to these developments was the rise of the underground press in the late 1960s. Peck's (1985) history of the underground press in the 1960s situates the rise of magazines catering to a rock audience within the framework of cultural and political debate. Indeed, the

editorial *raison d'être* of many underground periodicals was to provide an audience with published music criticism. Correspondingly, the association of music with popular music with notions of radicalism, opposition and dissent influenced the style and content of music journalism. For example, in Britain in the late 1970s, journalists writing for the weekly music press sought to mimic the oppositional voice of punk rock by presenting themselves as speaking *for* a new youth culture rather than merely *about* one. Moreover, when writing for an independent or underground publication, journalists often chose to mark themselves off from mainstream discourses. For instance, underground publications such as *Oz* (Australia and United Kingdom) and *International Times* (United Kingdom) reveled in their status as channels for dissent and in their frequent pillory by daily 'Establishment' papers. A 1969 report in the British Sunday tabloid *The People* opined: 'Maybe they are published for ideological reasons. But there's no ideology in teaching kids to take drugs and mutilate their sex organs as *Oz* does. I implore shop and discotheque owners: Don't help to spread this muck' (quoted in Hutchinson 1992, 104).

The radicalism exhibited in these underground publications was inevitably contextual and a reaction to particular and temporary dominant discourses. For example, in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, a proliferation of 'black' magazines (some, like *Pace*, covert products of the apartheid state's propaganda onslaught) recognized and made space for the coverage of black popular music, in English and in some African languages. A counter-critique then developed in the pages of various independent and underground radical publications, and in the covertly imported publications of exiled cultural workers and the Department of Arts and Culture of the African National Congress. While the mainstream magazines merely described and adulated, these more radical journals dealt with popular music as having meaning for South African society and politics. Particularly influential was the *MEDU Newsletter* (Botswana), published by a group of cultural exiles and Botswana citizens, which at one time included both Hugh Masekela and *Cry Freedom* soundtrack composer Jonas Gwangwa. These journalists presented indigenous popular music as a legitimate and culturally important practise, while also providing a documentation of music not valued by the dominant culture.

Underground periodicals and, latterly, fanzines and zines have been particularly tied to popular music criticism because they have served, and have continued to function, as a training ground for many journalists, and have been the impetus for many who have chosen as a career reporting and editing in the mainstream or under-



ground press. Toynbee (1993) cites the ex-underground UK press journalist Charles Shaar Murray as an influential figure in the development of journalistic style from the early 1970s onward. Toynbee argues that Murray, in his close reading of rock texts, mixed post-Leavisite literary criticism with auteurism from film criticism, as well as attempting to draw up a rock canon that encompassed Elvis, blues guitarists and avant-garde musicians. He argues that these elements were central to the 're-establishment of a high/low culture demarcation' within rock ideology (1993, 291). Added to these elements was the development of a 'mid-Atlantic' journalese, which mixed North American slang, regular clusters of short sentences, puns and contemporary metaphor.

### The Rock Journalist

Linked to this stylistic evolution was the development of the cult of the rock journalist, in which the figure of the writer took on the romantic attributes of the rock star. Journalists of the 1970s, such as Nick Kent (United Kingdom) and Lester Bangs (United States), carefully cultivated public images of themselves. For instance, at the start of his retrospective review of Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, Bangs places the record in relation to his own experiences and to popular cultural myths relating to late-1960s burnout: 'It was particularly important to me because the fall of 1968 was such a terrible time: I was a physical and mental wreck, nerves shredded and ghosts and spiders looming and squatting across the mind' (1991, 20). Kent's writing is peppered with references to his own drug-taking, hedonism and personal relationships with such infamous rock stars as Sid Vicious and Keith Richards. Hill (1991) describes music journalists of this time as a 'fraternity [which] unerringly reflected the culture it documented' (173). The figure of the journalist can thus be linked to the specifically male image of the romantic bohemian figure entrenched within rock mythology.

McDonnell's and Powers's (1995) collection of rock writing by women celebrates the proliferation of women in this field, reflecting that they are rarely celebrated as great or 'legendary' writers or included in the canon of rock criticism. Sullivan's (1995) account of the day-to-day demands of her career further suggests that the romantic image of the journalist is a construction that is directly at odds with the realities of the profession. She outlines the drawbacks of the job: its low pay and unsociable hours; the necessity of traveling alone to get to gigs; and the severe limitations imposed by deadlines on the amount of research a journalist can do on a particular artist.

### Journalistic Style and Practise

While the influence of the New Journalism is evident across a wide spectrum of music journalism, there are

also differences in journalistic style and practise across publications. Specialist music magazines and newspapers may, for example, use a brash, opinionated tone to establish credibility with their readership. Music reviews and interviews with musicians are often littered with obscure or canonical musical reference points, which serve simultaneously to establish the journalist's authority and to target the publication at an imagined audience of music connoisseurs. As national and local newspapers are not targeted at such niche markets, the content of music articles is inevitably distinct. Music sections in local newspapers generally cover local gigs and events and publicize local musicians. Alternatively, concert and album reviews in national newspapers often comprise part of a popular culture section that offers readers an overview of current music, book and film releases. Thus, the form and content of articles are shaped by considerations of the role and readership of a publication. Caroline Sullivan, music columnist for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, comments that her 'readership is mainly educated and left-of-centre, and I take this into account when deciding what to write about. It's not necessary to be quite so cutting edge as in the music press, but I do have to monitor trends and be adaptable' (1995, 141).

On a more general level, music journalism has its own particular conventions in the way in which music is represented in descriptive terms. It has been widely argued (Stratton 1982; Breen 1987; Frith 1996) that the effusiveness of the criteria by which music is judged and described has led to music journalism being a confused and unstable form. Frith (1996) contends that 'the language of music criticism . . . depends upon the confusion of the subjective and objective' (67). Following Roland Barthes' observation that, in music criticism, musical work and performance are 'invariably translated into the poorest linguistic category: the adjective,' Frith points out that adjectives are used by music journalists to 'relate music to its possible uses' and in the generic classification of a particular piece (67).

Stratton's (1982) research among British music journalists bears out this confusion in that it concludes that their writing is grounded in the use of critical language and assumptions that are in direct opposition to the rationalizing objective needs of capitalism. They are, in a sense, forced into a subjective critical position. Stratton points out that the critical criteria of journalism generally fail to value and discuss elements of work when judging a musical text. Thus, time spent writing, rehearsing or performing (elements of the creative process that are linked to commerce and production) is all but ignored. Instead, value is placed on subjective notions, such as the 'quality of emotion' and the 'quality of the



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idea' apparent in a piece of music. In this mode, criticism rests on qualities that are grounded in such relative concepts as 'authenticity,' emotional directness and intensity. The ambiguous and uncertain nature of the critical criteria of music journalism is echoed in the answers of Stratton's respondents to questions about how they judge music. For instance, 'it doesn't matter who the guy was who did it; if the end product has some indefinable quality about it then that's great' (1982, 277). This is perhaps illustrative of Jones's comment that authenticity is the most 'invisible and opaque of the ideas that occupy popular music critics, yet it is referred to in almost all popular music criticism' (1992, 101).

Journalistic and academic writing about popular music have often intersected, most notably in the work of Greil Marcus, Jon Savage, Dave Laing, Simon Frith and Robert Christgau. Much of their work was concerned with the exploration and deconstruction of popular music mythologies, along with the location of music with regard to its social uses. Indeed, many of Laing's and Frith's early journalistic work went on to inform debates within popular music studies (reflected in their subsequent involvement and influence in the field). Nehring (1997) argues that the late 1980s and 1990s saw the adaptation of academic postmodern theory by British and North American music journalists. Writers such as Simon Reynolds, Joy Press and David Stubbs incorporated ideas taken from literary criticism, such as psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, to explore the cultural significance of music, including movements such as 'new pop,' 'dreampop' and 'shambling.'

However, although journalists such as Reynolds were celebrated and controversial, such appropriation of academic theory was limited to a small number of writers. They can be regarded as the exception, since many contemporary journalists operated within the stylistic conventions established in the 1960s and 1970s. Arguably, traits associated with postmodernism were more widely apparent in the rise of the life-style magazine in the 1980s. Hebdige (1988) sees the UK music and fashion magazine *The Face* as an exemplar of postmodernism: it 'renounces social realism ... and promotes consumer aesthetics and multiple style elites,' and 'goes out of its way to blur the line between politics and parody and pastiche' (161). Hebdige argues that the content of *The Face* is decontextualized and that it adds up to an 'empty chain of signifiers' (161). His observations, however, lean heavily on the magazine's layout and juxtaposition of particular reference points and, despite its use of irony and intertextuality, it is nevertheless grounded within the contexts of popular cultural journalism.

### Conclusion

Whatever the stylistic developments and changes over the years, most music journalism has been closely linked to the music industry, with journalists themselves deeply involved in its promotional cycle. Due to this nature of criticism, music journalism has an inherent need to be seen as autonomous. Many journalistic techniques, then, are part of the process that creates an image of critical distance and separation from the promotional arm of the music industry. The music journalist must, at the same time, promote the product released through the industry, and anticipate and order the reception of his/her readership. Because of this duality, music writing provides an invaluable temporal route to the fast-moving cycles of the music industry and culture for popular music fans and scholars. As such, music journalism has continued to be an important and influential forum in which popular music discourse is created and mediated.

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### Filmography

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MARION LEONARD and ROBERT STRACHAN with GWEN ANSELL (South Africa) and STEVE JONES (United States)

### Kinship

'Kinship' is a term generally used to denote relationships between individuals and groups that are defined through blood, and there are many different ways in which commercial and mass-industrialized forms of popular music reflect, address and influence kinship practises, relations and ideologies. Yet popular music, particularly rock and pop, has often been associated with an anti-kinship or anti-family ideology, an ideology reflected in the lack of discussion on kinship in academic and journalistic writing on popular music. Rock ideology, for example, has tended to romanticize rebellion, nonconformism and intergenerational conflict; and rock has been linked with youthful male peer groups, public spaces such as the 'street' and the 'road,' and the more sensational or spectacular aspects of popular music culture. Kinship and the more private, everyday and domestic spheres of family and home have thus been marginalized.

However, well-known popular songwriters such as Lennon and McCartney, who have written lyrics about sex and revolution, have also written songs about their mothers, wives and children (for example, 'Mother' by John Lennon and 'Lovely Linda' by Paul McCartney). And there are many other ways in which popular music relates closely to kinship and to family life. Blood relatives, for example, frequently share music-making as a

hobby or profession. Hence, Mike McCartney, like his brother Paul, joined a pop band and had songs in the charts, while sisters Dannii and Kylie Minogue have both enjoyed successful careers as solo pop performers. Other siblings perform in the same musical group – for example, the Gallagher brothers of the British rock band Oasis, and the Wilson brothers who performed with their cousin in the Beach Boys. Some groups are comprised entirely of siblings, including pop groups like the Osmonds and the Jackson 5, and the Beverley, Andrews and Nolan Sisters. Husbands and wives also perform in public together – the pop duo Sonny and Cher is an example – as do blood relatives of different generations – for instance, Naomi Judd and her daughter Wynonna, who performed as the country group the Judds; Frank Sinatra and his daughter Nancy, who performed as a duo; and Wizz Jones and his son Simeon, who have performed as a folk duo.

There are also many musicians who might not perform with their parents, but who nevertheless have chosen similar musical careers. Julian Lennon, Dweezil Zappa, Zak Dylan and Ziggy Marley have all followed in the musical footsteps of their famous fathers. Similarly, the fathers and uncles of the pop band 3T were members of the Jackson 5. Other well-known 'musical families' include country music dynasties such as the Carter and Stoneman Families, and the illustrious musical family of *balafon* player Mory Kanté from eastern Guinea. Family groupings are also commonplace within English concertina bands (Cohen and McManus 1991), New Orleans jazz bands (Barker and Buerkle 1973) and US minstrel groups (Hamm 1979, 142). In some cultures, particular castes, lineages or other kinship groups are categorized as musical and those born within them become musicians through family inheritance. Youssou N'Dour, for example, is a singing *griot* born into a Senegalese *griot* family through his mother's line. In addition, some musical genres and styles, such as country and gospel, promote a strong family ideology in order to sustain notions of tradition and to perpetuate specific values. The Carter Family acted as a powerful emblem of this ideology in country music.

Family members in musical groups do not necessarily experience harmonious relationships, and friction and feuding between musical kin are commonplace. Notorious examples include the reported rivalry between solo artists Julian and Sean Lennon, and the arguments and physical fights between the Gallagher brothers of Oasis and the Davies brothers of the Kinks.

Relatives often take on an organizational or administrative role to help develop the musical careers of their fellow kin. The Osmonds, the Jackson 5 and the Beach Boys, for example, were all managed by their fathers,