

CONTINUUM ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
POPULAR MUSIC
OF THE WORLD



VOLUME I
MEDIA, INDUSTRY AND SOCIETY

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VOLUME I:
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DAVID HORN

Music Press

The music press – magazines, newspapers or journals primarily concerned with popular music – constitutes an important medium through which information about music and the meanings of popular music are negotiated, created and disseminated. The term 'music press' encompasses a variety of publications that evidence different styles, formats, journalistic strategies and ideologies, as well as various levels of engagement with the subject. However, the music press can be broadly categorized into several distinct types of publications, each catering to different markets: the weekly pop and rock music press (a phenomenon unique to Britain, where these are often referred to as 'inkies'); 'teen-pop' magazines; genre-based magazines; glossy (usually monthly) magazines with a general responsibility for covering popular music; musicians' magazines; trade journals; and fanzines or zines. There are distinct national variations in the structure of the music too.

A number of periodicals concerned with popular music existed as early as the late nineteenth century – for example, the trade magazine *Billboard* (US, 1894), and *The Music Hall* (UK, 1889). However, the roots of the modern music press lie in the jazz age, with publications

such as *Melody Maker* (UK). Originally established as a trade paper in 1926, *Melody Maker* evolved into a general magazine aimed at jazz audiences and musicians. Various other titles followed in the next 20 years, including the jazz publications *Down Beat* (US, 1934), *Jazz Hot* (France, 1935), *Jazz Journal* (UK, 1948) and *The Beat* (Australia, 1949). The 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of pop papers targeted at a predominantly early teenage pop market, including British magazines such as *New Musical Express* (NME) (1952, launched as *Musical Express* in 1946), *Record Mirror* (1953) and *Disc* (1958). The content of all these early examples is reflected in more contemporary teen-pop magazines, including *RTR Countdown* (New Zealand) and *Popcorn* (Bulgaria). The journalistic style and content of these pop publications have tended to be light, with short articles, little assumed knowledge of music history and a strong focus on the 'star' persona or pinup value of featured performers. This type of magazine has been an important marketing tool, as it generally has a much larger circulation than the weekly or monthly rock press. For instance, in 2000–2001 *Smash Hits* (UK) had a circulation of around 270,000, nearly four times that of the UK 'inkies' (ABC 2001).

The emerging split between rock and pop in the latter part of the 1960s saw a repositioning of several titles and the launch of new publications in response to the popularity and journalistic style of the underground press. *Melody Maker* and NME moved toward pop interests, while new titles such as *Rock & Folk* (France, 1966), *Crawdaddy!* (US, 1966), *Rolling Stone* (US, 1968), *Creem* (US, 1968) and *Sounds* (UK, 1970) emerged, specifically aimed at the rock market. These publications were produced as either weekly broadsheet-style music papers (NME, UK; *Hot Press*, Ireland) or glossy monthly magazines, and were marketed to appeal to a late teenage (and predominantly male) readership. Although these new titles adhered to essentially the same format as the pop and jazz publications that had preceded them, they featured longer, more in-depth articles and reviews, with an increased 'seriousness' in journalistic content, often attempting to place rock music within a specific socio-political context. In the early 1970s, a new, increasingly stylized form of journalistic writing developed that reflected the concerns and discourse of rock music culture. In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of new titles using similar layout and journalistic practise were launched in order to reach new markets. Conforming to the 'glossy' format, *Q* (UK) and *Mojo* (UK) have appealed to older CD-buying consumers, while *Les Inrockuptibles* (France) and *Spin* (US) have displayed a bias toward contemporary alternative acts.

Although there is often an editorial policy governing

the amount of emphasis put on a particular genre (for example, *Rolling Stone* has concentrated on rock, whereas *Smash Hits* has favored pop), both rock and teen-pop titles have evidenced a fairly wide coverage that includes numerous genres. However, a number of publications have concentrated on particular styles or subgenres. These niche magazines have catered for such specialist areas of taste as heavy metal (*Aardschok*, The Netherlands), hip-hop (*The Source*, US; *RER*, France; *Black Music Review*, Japan), blues (*Living Blues*, US; *Blues Unlimited*, UK) and folk (*Folk Roots*, UK). They have also concentrated specifically on acts in their circulation area: *Oxmox*, for instance, has covered the German alternative and heavy metal scene, while the long-running *Congo Disque* (Zaire) has covered Central African music since 1963.

Despite differences in niche coverage, target audience and journalistic style, much of the music press conforms to a common format. Publications generally start with a news section, which consists of brief reports on the music industry, concert tour and recording news, and personal information about popular artists. There is a features section, which usually contains profiles of and interviews with popular artists, or those deemed 'important' by writers and editors. In addition, most publications include a reviews section that covers concerts and recently released recordings; added to this, there may be a gig guide, with listings of upcoming concerts. In many cases, advertisements can also be thought of as making up a crucial part of a publication's content, adding to the sense of connectedness between music fans and enthusiasts by notifying readers of tour dates, new record releases, job opportunities, and the sale of music equipment, rare records or fanzines.

As well as magazines that concentrate on the promotion and criticism of popular music acts and artists, there is also a longstanding tradition of musicians' magazines. These magazines, which include *Guitars and Claviers* (France), *Canadian Musician* (Canada) and *Making Music* (UK), have concentrated on the technical and mechanical aspects of music-making, and consist of reviews of new musical instruments, hardware and accessories on the market, along with transcriptions or tablature and interviews with musicians. Interviews in these publications are distinct in that they are conducted with a focus on aspects of music-making, such as musical technique, and discussions on musical equipment. As Théberge (1991) points out, the majority of these magazines carry advertising aimed only at musicians, thus attempting to create a sense of community among music practitioners and consumers.

In some countries where there is no specialist music press, the development of popular music has been aided

1. Documentation

by coverage in publications that are not primarily oriented toward music. In the 1950s, for instance, the South African magazine *Drum*, directed at urban Africans, covered a mixture of politics, shebeen life, labor, crime, fashion, sex, literature and music. The magazine gave important coverage to the African 'Jazz Age' of the cosmopolitan black suburb of Sophiatown, and also set the style for music coverage later emulated by magazines across Africa, and by later South African imitations such as *Bona* and *Pace*.

The music press has been seen as central to the marketing and promotion of popular music. Along with radio and television, it has often been characterized as one of a number of gatekeepers positioned between the music industry and its audience. Hirsch's (1990) organization-set analysis of the music industry presents the music press as an institutional regulator of music industry output that acts as a filter between the recording industry and its audience. He argues that record companies release more products than can feasibly be successful in commercial terms and that, by selecting particular acts for heavy promotion, the music press acts as a regulator, narrowing down the number of 'products' that have an increased chance of gaining commercial success.

It is clear that the industry recognizes the importance of this relationship in terms of promotion and sales, and there are various strategies by which record companies attempt to influence the selection of products for coverage by the music press. Indeed, the relationship between the press and record labels is characterized by regular cajoling, promises of prominent coverage, and the provision of free food, alcohol and travel. Wale (1972) gives the example of a 1971 London press launch for Elektra Records, where £6,000 was spent on 'luxurious foods and ... vintage wine' (263). Negus (1992) points out that record companies actively court music press interest through their publicity departments, which maintain close personal contact with individual journalists, often 'matchmaking' relationships between particular journalists and acts which are seen to suit each other in terms of genre and taste. Furthermore, publicity departments may 'coach' new artists on what type of questions they may be asked and how they should respond in interviews. This process can occur early in the professional life of a particular act, when record companies and management may try to manipulate the journalistic desire to 'break' new music. Hesmondhalgh (1996, 129) gives the example of the way in which the UK independent record label Creation selected several key journalists to attend rehearsals and socialize with the newly signed British rock band Oasis, thus encouraging a favorable response before taking the risk of booking tour dates or releasing

recordings. Commentators have pointed to other ways in which the economic dependence of music journalists on record companies can operate. Chapple and Garofalo (1977) highlight the practise of journalists reselling 'free product' in order to subsidize their salaries; other critics (Frith 1983; Toynbee 1993; Negus 1992) have commented that many journalists are concurrently employed as A&R and publicity staff by the industry, or may manage acts or be musicians themselves.

This interdependence between the music industry and the music press has been seen as fostering a close relationship that calls into question the critical autonomy of the press. Indeed, the question of autonomy is central to the way in which the music press operates in terms of perceived ideology, content and journalistic style. On the one hand, it has to foster a workable relationship with the record companies and press offices, and, on the other, it has to maintain the image of distance from the industry in order to preserve its critical credibility in the eyes of its readership. Stratton (1982) argues that music magazines mask a capitalist/artistic dichotomy by creating the appearance of critical distance. In turn, this supposed independence legitimates the critical content of the music press. This 'distance' and 'independence' are reflected in the way music is written about in these publications, in that journalists serve to 'distance popular music consumers from the fact that they are essentially purchasing an economic commodity, by stressing the product's cultural significance' (Shuker 1994, 97).

The strategy of placing music within its social context can be viewed as operating in various ways. Frith (1983, 176) argues that the music press has created a 'sociology of rock,' in terms of which the readerships of particular publications identify with specific subcultures, taste cultures or life styles. In a publication such as *NME*, for example, records have been judged by their 'authenticity as a youth cultural product' (Frith 1983, 176): the major aesthetic criterion through which music has been valued has been derived according to the perceived social locations of the publication's readership. However, this approach to criticism does not simply constitute a one-way process in terms of which publications react to their audiences; rather, music magazines have been seen as playing a key role in the creation of a community or as leaders in the formation of taste cultures. Frith (1996) sees the role of the critic as 'creating a knowing (select) community,' which defines itself in opposition to the 'undiscriminating pop consumer' (67). Toynbee (1993) regards the press as dynamic in the creation and marketing of music scenes through the alliance of particular acts with constructed 'movements.' All of the selected acts within a movement are portrayed as socially, politically or aesthetically consistent. He argues that this con-

stitutes a 'periodization,' in which new acts are launched within distinct social time scales. Furthermore, Toynbee argues that the music press fulfills a didactic and corrective purpose, guiding its readership from one period to another through various strategies that invite the reader-ship to identify with the editorial position. In turn, this ascription of 'sociological' meaning by the press has been seen to affect not only the way in which music is interpreted, but also its practise and production. Street (1986) argues that the 'politicisation' of punk was due largely to the ascription of social meaning by the music press, which created political meanings for the music, as it 'forged the link between a three chord rock song and unemployment' (83).

The marketing of popular music journalism to different demographic and 'ethnic' groups demands that the music press address different 'imagined' communities. Frith (1983) points out that *Rolling Stone* has been active in the maintenance of an imaginary youth culture that no longer exists, harking back to the ideals of the US counterculture of the 1960s (the same argument could be applied to magazines such as *Mojo*, *Q* and *Rock & Folk*). Alternatively, Théberge (1991) sees musicians' magazines as central to the formation of a sense of community among musicians. He argues that the technological advancements in the 1980s and the increasingly internationalized and technical context of musical production have meant that local 'musical communities' have come to have less influence over aspiring musicians. In this model, the musicians' magazine has become a forum for the exchange of information and the encouragement of identity as part of a musical community.

As Toynbee (1993) and Shuker (1994) argue, another facet of the music press's role in leading taste is the part it plays in the formation of a popular music 'canon.' This canon constitutes a hegemonic discourse in which a number of artists are deemed 'great,' and are constantly referenced and reiterated as such. This process is articulated in the proliferation of press articles that list versions of the 100 best albums, singles and artists (of a particular year, decade or 'of all time'). Even in publications from non-English-speaking countries (France's *Rock & Folk*, for example), these selections have tended to be Anglo-American, with a heavy emphasis on late-1960s rock music. Indeed, the general content of many international publications (*Rockin' On Japan*, *Rock & Folk*) and the publication of *Rolling Stone* in German- and Japanese-language editions have reflected the global predominance of Anglo-American artists within the multinational record industry.

However, while the music press is undoubtedly an important source of music information and publicity, other promotional avenues and strategies (such as links

with radio, the film industry and international music television channels) have demonstrated a clear ability to market music on a global scale. The concentration on marketing through these channels, along with other factors such as the rise of electronic publications and the fragmentation of the rock market, has in some cases led to a drop in circulation figures for established music press publications. In 2000, *Melody Maker* ceased publication after 73 years when its circulation figures dropped to around 30,000 (compared with a high of 250,000 in the 1970s), and the UK monthly magazine *Select* folded in the same year. Publishing companies have responded to this situation by attempting to diversify, often by using the brand profile of existing print publications to move into other media formats. Publishing houses IPC and Emap, for example, have expanded their music titles, such as *Kerrang!*, *Mixmag* and *Smash Hits*, into on-line publication, e-retail, and television and radio, using the same names to create 'umbrella' brands. This kind of expansion has enabled certain publications to continue as viable concerns. For instance, while its print circulation has been steadily declining (to below 100,000), NME's Web-based portal reached 29 million page impressions per month in 2001. Such developments suggest that the music press must stay in tune with rapidly changing trends in information technology in order to survive. While the demand for music criticism and evaluation will undoubtedly remain, future advances in technology will continue to present fresh challenges to the nature and practises of music journalism.

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