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One and a Half Stars: A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America

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The definitive version was published in Popular Music, 20:1, 2001, pp.47-60. DOI:10.1017/S0261143001001301

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Popular Music (2001) Volume 20/1. Copyright © 2001 Cambridge University Press, pp. 47–60.
Printed in the United Kingdom

'★½': a critique of rock criticism in North America

KEMBREW McLEOD

As a particular type of gatekeeper, rock critics play a significant role in shaping the representations of artists for an admittedly small, but influential, population, as well as establishing an artist's place in music history. In *Sound Effects*, Simon Frith (1983) maintains that rock critics are 'opinion leaders' and are the 'ideological gatekeepers' of the community for which they write. Additionally, I argue that rock critics function as Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' who articulate the ideas held by the population of which they are a part (Gramsci 1971, pp. 5–14). The community that rock critics represent and speak for is made up of an overlapping network that comprises those connected with college radio, record collectors, local music scene participants, musicians and various record company employees, among others. Frith (1996, p. 18) argues in *Performing Rites* that if 'social relations are constituted in cultural practice, then our sense of identity and difference is established *in the process of discrimination*'. By understanding the ways in which evaluations are made within the communities that rock critics are a part of, we can gain a better understanding of the communities themselves. Because there are no sustained scholarly writings that examine rock criticism in North America from a historical, sociological or communicative perspective, it is important to begin examining the profession of the rock critic, as well as the discourse generated by rock criticism.

After briefly outlining a history of rock criticism with a focus on its North American origins, I move on to discuss and critique a specific 'ideology of rock criticism', one that – to summarise and simplify – valorises serious, masculine 'authentic' rock and dismisses trivial, feminine 'prefabricated' pop music. I do not believe there is simply one uniform ideology of rock criticism, with a capital 'I', and I make no claims that every critic, or even most critics, are interpolated into this ideologically charged interpretive framework. Its hegemony is not so powerful that we can see it within the writings of all critics, but this ideology nevertheless exists, and traces of it – its discursive residue – are readily apparent in the relatively consistent types of artists who are singled out for praise by critics over the past twenty-five to thirty years. Within *The Village Voice* Pazz & Jop rock critics' poll, the granddaddy of all rock critic polls, the most obvious pattern that emerges when looking at those artists who appear within the top ten is that of male dominance. Of the fourteen artists who occupy the elite category of appearing in the poll's top ten on four or more occasions, all are male artists, and this 'boy's club' is reflected by the fact that men still dominate rock criticism in the late 1990s. Further, I demonstrate how those artists are written about and evaluated in a gendered manner.

Because the subject of rock criticism is so massive and there exists almost no sustained body of literature that has examined it, to provide focus I will structure this essay around gender. Despite the almost yearly celebrations of the 'year of the woman' in rock in the 1990s, the rock industry continues to remain a male-dominated sphere of activity. Because of the critic's role as an 'ideological gatekeeper', this profession is worth further examining – not as the source of patriarchy, but for its part in sustaining it through a number of ways. The primary communication question I answer in this essay is how discourse can reproduce and maintain structured systems of inequality, and while my focus is on the communities that rock critics represent, my analysis can be applied to other discursive communities as well.

A brief history

Rock 'n' roll emerged as a popular form of music in the mid-1950s, but rock criticism in the United States did not develop until well into the 1960s. Rock criticism's development in other English-speaking countries was different in specific ways, particularly in Britain, which has sustained nationally distributed weekly music papers such as *Melody Maker* and the *NME* (New Musical Express) since the 1950s. The fact that the US has no similar weekly music periodical aimed at a popular readership is due in part to government policy and other institutional factors. For instance, because of the BBC's role as the monopoly radio provider in Britain, the promotional/filtering function of US Top 40 radio was taken up by these British 'inkies' (i.e. newspapers) (Toynbee 1993).

Unlike *Melody Maker* throughout the 1950s, the target market of the *NME*, *Record Mirror* and *Disc* was a young pop audience, but it was not until 1972–3 that, Toynbee (1993, p. 290) writes, 'a style of journalism which could match the discourse of rock reception finally gained mass distribution'. *Melody Maker*, *NME* and other similar periodicals have gone through numerous shifts in focus and content throughout the years – with one relative congruity being NME's support of more 'underground' or 'indie' ('independent') music. By the late-1980s their inkies' readership had been somewhat eroded by an upsurge of monthly magazines known as 'style bibles' such as *The Face, Blitz* and *ID*, as well as newer glossy rock magazines like *Vox* and *Q*, which combined the critical content of the 'inkies' and the visual orientation and the more general focus on pop culture of the style magazines (Shuker 1994). Overall, the British popular music press has more consistently embraced independent rock music than its North American counterparts; for instance, there were no outlets for a sustained national coverage of the 1976–1979 punk movement in the US in the way there was in the UK.

On a very basic level, rock criticism in North America developed its vocabulary from the one- or two-line record reviews found in *Billboard* or *Cashbox*, two major music trade papers that still exist. Ennis (1992, p. 341) writes, 'The shrewd reviewers of those papers were masters at identifying for each record its musical style, its ancestors and influences, the merit of its performance, and the likelihood of its commercial success'. One significant reason why no substantive rock criticism had developed was because rock 'n' roll was aimed at a teenaged market. Young people at the time had neither the resources nor a reason to express themselves in a more 'sophisticated' manner. The only music magazines aimed at teenagers were fan magazines like *Hit Parader*, which primarily reprinted song lyrics and crammed

its pages with photos of music stars. As late as the early 1960s, no tradition in the United States had developed around rock music that corresponded to jazz music criticism, with its cultivated, articulate vocabulary and deep, penetrating analyses. By the mid-1960s, this began to change. *Crawdaddy: The Magazine of Rock* emerged in 1966:

> . . . with an air of musical knowledge and commitment that clearly indicated that rock had found a mature critical voice. This pioneer 'fanzine', founded by Paul Williams, was one of hundreds of such small, generally mimeographed magazines that ranged from simple adulation to a polemical-analytical stance by and for the developing rock audience. (Ennis 1992, p. 342)

In the United States, Frith (1983) observes, rock music magazines like *Rolling Stone* emerged not only from the foundations of the trade papers and teen magazines, but also from the underground press – which was exemplified by the early publications, *Village Voice, LA Free Press* and *Berkeley Barb*. Significantly, 1960s underground culture emphasises the notion of authenticity and authentic expression, and Frith (1983, p. 168) states, 'Rock turned out to be the basic form of underground culture, but in becoming so it was imbued with an ideology that was at marked variance with previous notions of pop: rock was valued for its political stance, its aggression, its sexuality, its relationship to the underground.' *Rolling Stone*, along with *Crawdaddy, Creem* and other similar rock magazines served to further construct the 'ideology of rock', as Frith (1983) calls it. This ideology was employed to further distinguish rock from, and legitimise it against, other forms of popular music.

In *Sound Effects*, Frith identifies three aspects of this ideology. First, there is the construct of the rock musician's 'career', which assumes that it is a 'craft' that must be developed through several years of 'dues paying'. Second, rock is perceived as a complex art form and an expression of subcultural and generational identity. Third, there is believed to be a 'real' bond between the rock performers and their audiences who, as a whole, comprise the 'rock community'. One of the crystallising moments for rock ideology and rock criticism, according to Keith Negus, was the release of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967. '*Sergeant Pepper* was released at a time when the ''ideology of rock'' was being codified by a new generation of writers who were legitimating ''their'' music in terms of an aesthetic tradition into which they had been educated', Negus (1996, p. 154) writes. 'Crucial to the mediation of *Sergeant Pepper* were the opinions of a new occupational group, the professional rock journalists.' (Negus 1996, pp. 154–5)

Articulation theory and ideology

When one wants to look at the relationship between ideology and societal institutions in a non-deterministic manner, articulation theory is extremely useful. Articulation, as it has evolved within Cultural Studies, carries a double meaning. To speak, or to be articulate, is the more common understanding of the term in the United States, but it is the second meaning – a joining of different parts – that is of primary interest. Hall (1996, p. 140) states:

> An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be made? So the so-called 'unity of a discourse' is really the articulation of different, distinct

elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. (Hall 1996, p. 140)

Articulation, within the writings of Hall (1980, 1985, 1996), Laclau (1977), Grossberg (1992) and Slack (1996) is most commonly discussed in the context of discourse and ideology. Hall (1996, p. 140) states, 'a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at conjunctures, to certain political subjects'. This conception of ideology is very useful within this study, because this particular rock critic ideology should not be conceived as all-powerful – as interpolating all critics at all times into this ideologically charged interpretive framework. It is subject to breaks, disjunctures and contestations, but as the following analysis will demonstrate, the ideology remains deeply ingrained enough to generate observable patterns within discourse across time.

The ideology of rock criticism

The ideology of rock that Frith identified provides the foundation of the ideology of rock criticism I will examine. Frith writes:

For most rock critics, then . . . the issue in the end isn't so much representing music to the public . . . as creating a knowing community, orchestrating a collusion between selected musicians and an equally select part of the public – select in its superiority to the ordinary, undiscriminating pop consumer. (Frith 1996, p. 67)

This community of record collectors and fans, Straw (1997, pp. 3–15) observes, is a male-dominated homosocial environment that is characterised by slavish devotion to shared, specialised knowledge and the careful guarding of that knowledge to defend against the encroachment of 'outsiders'. Throughout its history, rock criticism has been dominated by men, and it still is – though, by the 1990s, slightly more women have gained entry into this field. This new wave of female critics, along with a few male critics, have struggled against this ideology's hegemony, though it still remains powerful in guiding the evaluations made by many rock critics. From its early stages, the exclusionary discourse that has defined this ideology implicitly employs the rock/pop dichotomy, as well as a gendered evaluative framework. The specific way this is manifested in rock critic discourse will be examined in the next section.

'Rock criticism, in short, makes arguments about audiences as well as about sounds, about the ways music works as a social event', states Frith (1996, p. 68). In *Performing Rites*, Frith (1996) argues that rock critic discourse is tightly bound up with group identity formations. Because critics articulate and influence the attitudes of the taste community of which they are a part, the perceived audience that consumes a particular artist's music or genre is significant. Longhurst (1995, p. 107) writes, 'pop music has often been seen as ''immature'' or superficial because of its implied audience among young women'. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the value judgements of this taste community are reflected in this ideology. The question of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' is common to all types of criticism, and the evaluations of critics typically revolve around the question of how a cultural text generates a kind of authentic or genuine experience for an audience (or how that is embedded in the text). As I have just defined it, this conception of critical

reception is quite broad, but by engaging in a concrete analysis of rock critic discourse – by charting who is praised and who is not, then looking at how they were discussed – we can look for discursive patterns to make sense of how rock critics evaluate music. Mapping the patterns that are dominant in the writings of rock criticism highlights some of the central, shared values of rock critics, allowing us to begin to make sense of how their evaluations are framed.

McLeod (1999) does something similar when he examines claims of authenticity and the contexts under which they are invoked within a particular form of African–American culture: hip-hop. In the mid-to-late 1990s, authenticity claims had been extremely pervasive within hip-hop music communities, which previously existed on the margins of mainstream American culture. By mapping the range of meanings associated with authenticity as they are invoked discursively, one can gain a better understanding of, in this case study, *how* a culture in danger of assimilation actively attempts to preserve its identity. By organising the expressions used in hip-hop discourse and analysing them, 'identity talk' can be understood as structured, meaningful, and a way of comprehending central elements of hip-hop culture from a 'native' hip-hop point of view. When hip-hop community members disparage inauthentic symbols of identity and valorise authentic symbols of identity, they implicate themselves in a larger cultural logic shared by other cultures and subcultures which face the contradiction of being inside a mainstream culture that they define themselves against.

The same is true of mainstream rock criticism, where rock critics – who represent the attitudes of those within a larger network of music communities – use their evaluative criteria to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' artists by demarcating what kinds of expressions are legitimate, and what are not. Rock critics must justify why the artists they critique are worthless or worthwhile, and I will demonstrate how this is done discursively in a traditionally gendered manner. Whether or not particular critics embrace this ideology is not as important as the cumulative effects of the evaluations of critics over time, and traces of it can be found in most rock critics' writings at some point or another. In the final section of this essay I locate rock criticism within the music industry more generally, illustrating what role critics play in shaping the reception and promotion of artists, among other things.

Contemporary female music critics, informed by feminist theory and their own experience, have played an important role in critiquing this dominant ideology of rock criticism. In the book *Rock She Wrote: Women Write about Rock, Pop, and Rap*, Ann Powers states:

> Women – marginalized from the defining discourse that established pop's canon through books and magazines, its rules through the road life of mostly male performers and the business dealings of mostly male executives, and its image through the dominant presence of those gorgeous boy stars – are particularly conscious of the decentered nature of pop's genesis and its effects. Filling in the gaps, women writers throw into doubt the hierarchies of taste and of experience that order pop's history, and challenge the order that, paradoxically, relies on their willingness to be seduced without allowing for their full participation. (Powers 1995, p. 462)

Women rock critics have increasingly written about, and taken seriously, subjects that many male critics have repeatedly written off – for instance, the 'teenybopper' pop music fan. In 'Devils or angels? The female teenage audience examined', Lori Twersky (1995) calls into question the assumption that young female pop

fans are mindless entities that simply lust after the latest musical idol; she argues that the fan experience is much more contradictory and complex. Gina Arnold wrote a sympathetic article on Nelson and other similar pop groups who have a large young female following: 'There was a time when I objected to bands like this one imposing the shallow dreams and false values of their golden looks and starry eyes on the defenseless minds of unsophisticated girls', Arnold (1995A, p. 265) states. Writing in the present tense, Arnold (1995A, p. 265) acknowledges the error of her thinking, goes on to affirm the communication that occurs between fans and pop performers, and concludes, 'I think Nelson understands those girls – that there's a bond between the two groups, which people like me have no right to deny either faction.'

The assumptions that have shaped the critical discourse about pop music that has been made by women, or music that has a very large teenage female fan base, are assumptions that many female (and some male) rock critics have worked to overturn. In his book, *The Accidental Evolution of Rock 'n'Roll*, Chuck Eddy (1997, pp. 314–5) – a man who has challenged the conventions of rock criticism for years – argues, 'maybe I'm a little out of touch, but I still don't understand any forum that acts like the supposed ''dominant discourse of the day'' prevents pop hits from working non-corporate-sanctioned miracles in people's lives. I don't get how ''culture'' can mean anything *but* those lives.' He goes on to point out that Liz Phair's recording 'Fuck and Run' has the same lyric plot as 'All That She Wants' by Ace of Base, a Scandinavian pop group which has been compared to ABBA, and that was extremely popular among young teenage girls in the mid-1990s. Eddy draws a few more comparisons between songs by artists that rock critics dislike and admire to highlight the lyrical and thematic similarities among their songs.

To summarise, this ideology of rock criticism that shapes the critical reception of contemporary artists and helps to write the history of rock has functioned to exclude the voices of many kinds of pop artists and audiences. Whether they be sexual exhibitions or cultural displays, there are certain types of expression that are not deemed to be acceptable or legitimate by many rock critics and the communities they represent. Artists like Nelson and the Spice Girls, whose most visible fans are eight to thirteen year-old girls, are regularly dismissed. Dance-oriented music made by and for gay males, but which often makes its way to the mainstream, is typically ignored as well. This has had the effect, at least within the communities that rock critics represent, of closing off certain possibilities for expression. Perhaps more importantly – as I will discuss in the final section – by setting the discursive criteria for who is worthy of attention, this ideology contributes to the reproduction of inequality within the music industry.

The *Village Voice* Critics' Poll

Because a rigorous and thorough survey of all rock criticism from the mid-1960s and on is impossible (for logistical reasons), a less ambitious way of analysing rock critic discourse is necessary. Nevertheless, it is important to employ a systematic method to make sense of rock critic discourse. I organise my analysis of rock critic discourse around the published results of *The Village Voice*'s annual poll, Pazz & Jop, which is the longest-running rock critics' poll in North America. Its annual list of winners can be viewed as a relatively accurate barometer of rock critic opinions during any given year because it represents a large number of writers throughout

North America whose criticism appears in everything from local newspapers to nationally distributed non-music and music-related magazines. It can still only provide a sketch, but this sketch is more reliable than any other method I have considered, especially given the number of issues of rock magazines that have been published (not to mention the various general-interest newspapers and magazines that have printed rock criticism). The poll's results tell a lot about what critics value. From those lists we can make initial, intuitive assumptions about what sort of criteria guide the evaluation of artists, but they tell us nothing about rock critic discourse itself. To do so, I employed three methods of analysing rock critic writings about Pazz & Jop winners to draw out their meanings, as well as to look for patterns within rock critic discourse across time.

First, drawing from the Pazz & Jop ballot top ten winners from 1971 through 1993,[1] I examine what was written about the winning albums in major music magazines during the year in which they were released. Those magazines are *Rolling Stone* (1971–1999), *Crawdaddy* (1971–1978), *Creem* (1971–1989) and *SPIN* (1985–1999). Additionally, I use the essays and writings in *The Village Voice* that accompany the Pazz & Jop poll to help make sense of the discourse in a historically situated manner. I chose to look almost exclusively at reviews in magazines and the record guides because they are relatively brief, making a broad survey of rock critic discourse manageable. Record reviews are useful to examine because the nature of the format forces the reviewers to boil down their opinions to their discursive essence, stripping rock criticism to its most ideologically unfiltered core. Frith writes, 'Roland Barthes may have been contemptuous of the use of adjectives in bourgeois music criticism, but music is, in fact, an adjectival experience.' (Frith 1996, p. 263) It is the use of adjectives (within the larger context of the review) that I examine in my analysis because they provide rich examples of the attitudes and values of rock critics who write for major magazines and newspapers.

Second, I examined the critical writings about those artists contained in reviews included in *The New Rolling Stone Record Guide*, published in 1983, and *The Rolling Stone Album Guide*, published in 1992. As North America's most widely read music magazine, *Rolling Stone*'s two record guides supply good examples of mainstream rock criticism written by a number of well-known critics, such as Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh, Jim Farber, David Fricke, Greil Marcus, Ira Robbins, and J.D. Considine, among others. Overall, it provides a good sample of the attitudes of most mainstream North American rock critics. Admittedly, there have been shifts over time in rock critic ideology which might be covered up by examining evaluations that were written at a different period than when the poll was conducted. But using these review guides nevertheless provides a more systematic snapshot than other methods might allow and, importantly, this is not the only method on which I rely to draw out patterns within the discourse of rock criticism – it is merely used to supplement the other methods. Interestingly, the writings about the albums that occurred at the time of their release closely correlate with how they were later evaluated in the *Rolling Stone* record guides.

With regard to my third method, feminist scholars have long argued that what is left out of written history is significant in and of itself. Within the context of Pazz & Jop, a list of those artists absent from critics' polls also tells an interesting story. I have compiled a list of popular recording artists who did not make the Pazz & Jop top ten, but whose albums were among the top sellers in that particular year. While silence is an important and telling form of rock critic discourse, I have

also looked at – when comments exist – the kinds of things that were said about those artists who were not favoured by rock critics within then-current music magazines, as well as the *Rolling Stone* review guides. The patterned discourse that has emerged within my extensive database of 583 reviews is extremely rich and interesting, but it can only be properly examined in the space that a separate essay would provide. (My purpose in carefully explaining my method is to provide the reader with confidence in the analysis I summarise in the following paragraphs.) With that in mind, I should emphasise that mapping the discursive patterns is not my primary purpose here; I am most interested in situating rock critic discourse within the economic and social institutions of the music industry.

To briefly summarise, originality is a positive attribute valorised by rock critics that can be heard repeated numerous times using a variety of adjectives such as 'daring', 'imaginative' or 'singular'. A real, authentic connection to rock music's past or to its audience is another trait that is valued within rock criticism, and angst, anger or aggression (corollaries of masculinity) are other positive attributes that are also referenced repeatedly by the critics who discuss Pazz & Jop winners. For lack of a better word, 'rawness' – that is, having 'primitive', 'stark', 'savage' or 'brutal' qualities – is another frequently used concept employed by rock critics, and an impassioned and simple approach to music making are values often valorised by rock. The flip side to rawness is sophistication, a trait that is equally revered by rock critics (that is, unless a critic is writing about 'overproduced', 'polished' pop), and within particular social contexts, simplicity – even stupidity – is seen as a virtue and, conversely, sophistication and intelligence can be equally valorised in other circumstances. Lastly, sincerity (being honest, speaking from the heart, etc.) is a positive trait that rock critics commonly cite.

Simon Frith argues that rock criticism is not so much about representing music to a public as cultivating a 'knowing community' that links a select set of musicians to an equally select set of listeners – people who define themselves as superior to the mainstream, undiscriminating pop consumer (Frith 1996, pp. 66–7). Elsewhere in *Performing Rites*, Frith argues that a more interesting and applicable distinction that can be applied to the study of music is not the oft-repeated high/low distinction, but the mainstream/margin one. But, as can be noted with a cursory glance at the list of Pazz & Jop top ten winners, many of these critically acclaimed artists *are* mainstream artists by record sales standards. Bruce Springstein, REM, Prince, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Steely Dan, The Clash, The Rolling Stones, U2 and Stevie Wonder have, individually, sold millions of albums over the course of their careers or, even, with a single album. Critics' polls do contain many artists that the majority of the public has never heard of, but many of the winners of Pazz & Jop are multi-platinum selling artists.

Frith (1996) points out that critics and readers define themselves against mainstream tastes, particularly during the late 1960s and early 1970s for *Rolling Stone*, and during the mid-to-late 1980s for *SPIN*. These magazines often covered obscure and noncommercial artists during those periods, but many of the artists who were written about in their pages sold many, many records. While the artists did not necessarily sell ten million records, they nevertheless sold a substantial amount. Therefore, the mainstream/margin distinction is not as fruitful a concept when applied to the examination of mainstream music criticism as it is in other instances. For instance, the artist that appeared on the cover of *SPIN*'s inaugural issue was Madonna, and the vast majority of those who appeared on the covers of *Rolling*

Stone during the first five years (The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, Elvis, Jim Morrison, Bob Dylan, CCR, etc.) were huge stars during their time ('Covers' 1997). Therefore, it is more important to look at how rock critics *represent* artists, how they distinguish between the 'good' artist who has sold a million records and the 'bad' artist that has done the same. The categories of traits that critics ascribe to the artists discussed above provide a useful basis to understand how rock critic evaluations are made. While more mainstream rock critics often (implicitly, at least) employ the rock/pop dichotomy and other gendered frameworks, as we go further away from mainstream rock magazines, this ideologically charged dichotomy becomes even more pronounced (a quick glance at the pages of punk zines like *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* will demonstrate that).

As was mentioned earlier, a list of those artists who did not make the Pazz & Jop top ten tells a story just as interesting as a list of those who did. Fortunately, a relatively useful record of what was happening in popular music in any given year does exist in the form of the *Billboard* music charts. Because there are no reliable data on yearly record sales, an accurate measure of annual top-selling artists can be constructed by looking at who had albums in the top ten of the *Billboard* album charts for ten weeks or more. To do this, I used *The All Music Book of Hit Albums*, which usefully compiles data from the *Billboard*, covering the years from 1960 to 1994. Just as a cursory glance at the Pazz & Jop winners provides an overall sketch from which one can draw intuitive conclusions about what critics like and do not like, such a list of 'losers' can also add richness to the analysis.

That roster of names is, essentially, a hit list (more of the assassin's variety than the sales chart kind) of some of the most critically despised popular music artists of the past three decades. To better understand how rock critics frame their evaluations we can look at the critical discourse surrounding artists who are critically dismissed. Inauthenticity, vapid simplicity, banality, slick professionalism and unoriginality – some of which are the inverse qualities used to describe critically praised artists – are traits negatively ascribed by rock critics to these kinds of artists. For instance, one way rock critics have dismissed an artist is by referring to the commercial nature of the group, and perhaps the most repeated condemnation by rock critics is based on an artist's perceived unoriginality (these artists are negatively described as following formulas, or being derivative or generic). In opposition to the 'raw' simplicity of many critically praised artists, rock critics often dismiss the 'vapid' simplicity of reviled pop artists.

In conclusion, it is important to note that some of the qualities used to describe critically hailed and despised artists are quite similar in nature, but they are imbued with different values. For instance, RUN-DMC's 'brutal simplicity' is praised, but The Carpenters' 'saccharine simplicity' is damned. Further, there is a clearly demarcated line that separates, for instance, the 'advanced sophistication' of critics' darlings and the 'slick professionalism' of pop artists. As I have demonstrated in my mapping of patterns within rock critic discourse, this demarcated line corresponds to the values of the taste community, and they are clearly gendered. I should state again that the writings of many North American rock critics are quite different in various ways, with Dave March, Greil Marcus, Robert Christgau, Robert Palmer, Jon Landau, Ed Ward, Evelyn McDonnell, Lester Bangs, Ann Powers, Peter Guralnick and others sharing little common ground on some key issues. Few critics' writings embody all of the characteristics of this rock critic ideology, but these characteristics nevertheless appear at different points in various critics' writings

across time. It is the *cumulative effect* of this patterned discourse – not the influence of a particular critic or piece of writing – that is most important in my analysis of rock criticism.

Rock criticism and the institution of rock

Despite the recent, almost mantra-like repetitions of the 'year of the woman' in rock (and the genuine advances made by female musicians), the music industry remains one of the most unequal industries within contemporary North America. Gender inequality is reflected in the composition of record labels, from A&R departments up through the executive level – all of which are remarkably unbalanced. One of the few places where one can more consistently find women is within publicity departments, but these jobs are typically viewed as falling within the lower rungs of the business. The inferior status of publicists is reflected by the attitude of a rock critic who once derisively referred to them as 'the flight attendants of the music industry'.

Gender inequality is also manifested in the world of rock criticism. The list of contributors to the annual Pazz & Jop poll provides a snapshot of the rock critic community's composition in any given year, and it relatively accurately reflects who is writing about music on both the national and local levels.[2] In 1978 through 1980, roughly seven per cent of the poll's participants were women. In the twenty years since second wave feminism helped alter the male/female ratio within most sectors of the workforce, the female participation rate in the 1997 and 1998 Pazz & Jop polls leapt to a whopping fifteen per cent (please pardon the sarcasm). One can also get a sense of the number of established female writers by glancing at the mastheads of most rock publications, by looking at who is and is not listed as a Contributing Editor or Senior Writer. They are overwhelmingly male. Even the relatively new *Rock & Rap Confidential/Addicted to Noise* critics' poll – which was founded by Dave Marsh and Michael Goldberg with the intent of trying to create a more diverse critics' poll – contains little representation by women, despite their good intentions. Though they had a relatively different set of participants, this poll also had a female participation rate hovering around fifteen per cent in 1998. While it is true that some women and men may opt out of the more mainstream rock critic community by exclusively working within the zine world, I believe the polls and magazine mastheads provide relatively accurate portraits of who is writing at the moment.

Rock critics often get new writing jobs because they know someone who can help bring them to the attention of a particular editor and, often, writers become editors who then add to their roster of writers critics with whom they are friendly. This is how it worked for me. For instance, I initially got my foot in the door when my college friend Chris Nelson recommended me to Michael Goldberg, who was then the editor and publisher of the online music magazine *Addicted to Noise*. From there I was able to build up a portfolio of clips to send to other magazines, but I found that most editors are flooded with requests to write for them. Therefore, the vast majority of my solicitations were ignored. I got some freelance jobs, but mostly I slipped through the cracks. Then, one day I e-mailed my friend Rob Sheffield (who is now a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*) and mentioned to him how much I liked Chuck Eddy's then-current book, and he responded by encouraging me to

e-mail Chuck to offer my opinion because Rob said that as he makes fun of artists in his reviews, Chuck often gets hate mail.

Chuck immediately began corresponding with me, and within two days of my first e-mail he recommended me to the editor of a now-defunct Australian music magazine, *Real Groove*. Later, he had Robert Christgau add me to the Pazz & Jop list of participants, and when Chuck became the music editor at the *Voice* he brought me along as a writer. I began writing for *Raygun* in a similar manner. After I met and became acquainted with a friend of a friend, he became Senior Editor at the magazine, and he later gave me contact information for the music editor at the *Boston Phoenix*, who was an old high school friend of his. Of course, no one would let me write for them if I was a bad writer, but *who* I knew was essential and, now, four years and nearly 400 published pieces later, I am an established (though small-time) music critic.

This personal story was not an exercise in self-indulgence, but, rather, an illustration of how the majority of rock critics have become successful. The way business is done within the rock critic establishment resembles the classic 'old boy network' more so than most types of contemporary businesses, and the music industry as a whole also runs by these 'who knows who' networking rules. This makes it much more difficult for those who do not run in the same circles to penetrate these networks. People who do not necessarily carry the proper cultural capital or share the same aesthetic values often find themselves outside these gated discursive communities, and these fences are, in part, erected through practices of discourse.

When I bring up the fact that the rock critic establishment is dominated by men, it is not my intention to essentialise the writing practices of men and women; a writer's sex organs do not predetermine a particularly gendered style of writing. For instance, Gina Arnold – one of the better-known female critics – often invokes a very strong sense of authenticity, among other things. When writing about Stone Temple Pilots, she stated, 'STP lack many of Pearl Jam's virtues, most notably Vedder's sincerity and . . . STP also lack roots, authenticity, and even the slightest vestige of punk rock cred.' (Arnold 1995B, p. 377) On the other hand, some male writers tend not to write in such a manner and often embrace musical styles that are traditionally coded as 'girly' – the aforementioned Chuck Eddy and Rob Sheffield come to mind. Nevertheless, this does not mean that gendered evaluative frameworks cannot, and do not, become articulated with male and female writers as a whole.

As a music critic it pains me to say this, but we exercise little power over record sales when compared to the juggernauts that are radio and MTV, but this does not mean critics have no influence. Even though they are not the *only* gatekeepers, rock critics are nevertheless gatekeepers that influence others and articulate the attitudes of their peers by concretely putting them into writing. Bad critical reception does not guarantee commercial failure for an artist (in fact, there is typically an inverse correlation between popularity and critical acceptance), but commercial failure combined with a critical reception that is less than enthusiastic might result in a band being dropped from a label. As well, a strong critical buzz for a new band is often incorporated into the promotion machinery of record companies, and this cultural capital is used to gain the attention of radio and MTV. In some cases, companies use positive reviews to court the music-buying public directly (for instance, Liz Phair's critically acclaimed debut sold very respectably despite the lack of mainstream radio or music television airplay).

Rock critics are part of an interconnected network, a network in which it is not unusual for people to change positions, moving from one type of job to another. For instance, music journalists are often recruited to become publicists, who are also taken from the farming industry that is college radio, which is also a place from which A&R people tend to come. Therefore, the discourses that emanate from within rock criticism are not simply isolated to the rock critic community, but the larger community of which they are a part. The gendered discursive constructions that are articulated by rock critics often either influence (or are shared by) A&R representatives who are charged with the task of signing new artists to a label.

I do not believe that most critics have mean-spirited intentions, or are even aware of this exclusion, but this area of cultural production illustrates how discourse helps shape social and economic institutions, and – inversely – how these institutions influence discursive practices. The rock critic ideology I have discussed throughout this paper also articulates with other discourses within our society that devalue the expression of, and the cultural texts consumed by, women and young girls (the low status of soap operas provides an example). The fear of a feminised popular culture has a long history reaching beyond the confines of rock criticism, ranging from the contemporary setting to Adorno's attacks on popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century. (For instance, describing a piece of music he disliked, Adorno referred to it as being 'as nonsensical as if it had originated in a girls' school'; Adorno 1978, p. 283.) In her study of the British 'rave' subcultures, Thornton stated, 'the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't' (Thornton 1996, p. 105). She demonstrated that participants in rave scenes defined themselves against an inauthentic, classed-down and *feminised* 'mainstream', concepts that were used to define the scene's borders.

Rock critic discourse also spills over into the academy, helping to shape the cannon of 'respectable' artists worthy of scholarly study. My analysis primarily focuses on the discourse contained in music magazines, but books have a lasting value and are more likely to be used within college courses. Barbara O'Dair (1999) briefly examines some of the major texts of rock writing like Griel Marcus' *Mystery Train* and the significant books of rock history to which major critics have contributed. *Mystery Train* is considered *the* classic study of rock and roll and has been used in college courses, but, significantly, it has no significant references to women (despite the fact that it was written at a time when radical feminism was flourishing). *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* – a book that contains essays by most major rock critics (Dave Marsh, Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, Robert Palmer, etc.) – has only three chapters devoted to individual female artists. On the other hand, male bands and individual male artists received roughly *one hundred* chapters. Written as a companion to the PBS series, Robert Palmer's *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History* contains, O'Dair writes, 'virtually *no significant references* to women's contributions to the genre' (O'Dair 1999, p. 247).

In my sampling of some other books, I found that *The Penguin Book of Rock & Roll Writing* (published in 1992) contains eighty chapters, only five of which were written by women and, unsurprisingly, there is distinct focus on male musicians. Joe Carducci's *Rock and the Pop Narcotic* (whose title says it all) takes the rock/pop dichotomy to ridiculous extremes, demonstrating the effects of maintaining such a hardline stance: out of over 2,000 entries contained in the index, less than 100 were female artists or female-fronted bands. This version of history, O'Dair writes, is

> . . . not necessarily the result of a vast conspiracy to write women out of history, but something deeper, more unsettling – a lack of passion for or connection with women . . . Because rock criticism and history have been almost completely written by males, critics' and historians' failure to identify across, not race or class, but primarily *gender* has caused a serious imbalance in rock's record. (O'Dair 1999, p. 249)

Conclusion

Using an older model of blatant, overt discrimination does not explain the relative exclusion of women within the music industry because, while chauvinism certainly exists in music scenes, I doubt that the prevailing attitude amongst music editors or record executives is that women are 'not capable' of doing the job. Instead, an explanation that takes into account structure and discourse is more useful, and examining how systems of discourse are linked to more concrete economic and social institutions is the best way to understand the nexus of rock criticism, the music industry, and gender inequality.

Engaging in rock criticism often requires one to employ particular cultural references, and the lack of that knowledge can put an aspiring rock critic at a decided disadvantage, or dissuade one from even considering that career option. As I have demonstrated, rock critics do not exist in isolation. They are part of a larger network of overlapping communities that include college radio, record stores, record collectors, publicists, A&R representatives, musicians, label executives and other members of the music industry or local music scenes. Rock critics articulate the attitudes of these communities, and they also influence them. Most importantly, the very nature of their profession positions them as key figures in maintaining the circulation of the discourses discussed throughout this essay.

In conclusion, being able to acquire the cultural capital needed to enter into these taste communities requires being fluent, essentially, in a rarefield language, as well as having knowledge of particular aesthetic hierarchies. While there are other processes involved, this is how rock critic discourse plays a significant role in reproducing and maintaining gender inequality within the rock critic establishment and the music industry, more generally. The specifics of what is said within discourse is articulated with the way in which taste communities and other networks are formed, which is – in turn – connected to the larger social and economic institutions of the music industry. In other words, the discourses that rock critics are instrumental in circulating helps shape who is picked to be on the team, who is made fun, and who feels comfortable enough to come out and play.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. The poll was not conducted in 1972 and 1973.
2. While looking at the first names of the listed writers is not the most foolproof way of determining a poll participant's gender, it is nonetheless the only method I have at my disposal, a method that I imagine would produce

no more than a two or three per cent margin of error. I also used my knowledge and contacts within the community to determine a writer's gender. For instance, some first names, like Chris Nelson, could be read as either male or female, but considering the fact I have known him for ten years, I am pretty sure he is a man. Some women occasionally use traditionally male names, and *vice versa*; e.g., Jane Dark – who writes for many major US rock publications – is really SPIN senior writer Joshua Clover, and Theresa Stern is punk musician and writer Richard Hell. Other pseudonymous names like Jazzbo (who is Joseph Patel) were more difficult to identify, but they were few and far between.

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