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Rock and Theory: A Critical Crisis

Brendan Kelly

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Media Studies

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

May 1992

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ABSTRACT

Rock and Theory: A Critical Crisis

Brendan Kelly

Rock music was first taken seriously by rock critics in the 1960s, as the music itself developed into more of a self-conscious art form, and many of the ideas first developed during these early days of rock criticism continue to influence the writing of rock journalists today. But rock has changed significantly over the past 25 years; in particular, the music - which was closely associated with the youth counterculture of the 1960s - has moved much closer to the mainstream of the entertainment industry since then.

This thesis will examine how newspaper and magazine rock critics attempt to come to terms with the changes that have happened in rock over the past three decades, and relevant examples of contemporary rock criticism will be analyzed. Rock music has begun to be taken more seriously by academic theorists in recent years, and the theoretical issues raised by these writers will be discussed in relation to the work of the media rock critics.

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INTRODUCTION

As the result of dramatic changes in the structure and content of popular music in recent years, rock criticism has reached a moment of ideological tension. The traditional critical assumptions about rock music, which were largely grounded in the countercultural spirit of the 1960s, are difficult to sustain when analyzing rock today. Thus, it seems like it might be an ideal time to take a look at critical rock writing: The theoretical crisis has brought many of the underlying critical issues to the surface in all types of rock writing.

This thesis will examine the theoretical debate by analyzing contemporary rock criticism in newspapers and magazines, within the framework of issues brought up in current academic discourse. The idea is to highlight the contemporary points of contention. The thesis will try to discover what the critics agree about and disagree about. Examining this critical debate will necessitate research into the historical roots of these theoretical

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debates, and that will entail tracing the theory back to its birth in the first days of serious rock criticism in the 1960s. The thesis will also have to start from an understanding of rock music in the 1990s, the radical changes that have occurred in the music and the industry over the past two decades, and how these shifts have affected rock writing. The other influencing factor that will have to be discussed - along with the music and the criticism itself - will be the constraints of rock writing within the general field of journalism.

The point of departure will have to be a description and analysis of the state of rock music now. This will be chapter one. The focus will be on the trends in music that have fundamentally changed the way people listen to rock, with both the music itself and the industry being taken into account. The crucial shift in rock has been the move from an exclusively youth-oriented, countercultural form to its current position in the mainstream of the entertainment industry. There are several factors to examine in this evolution. Perhaps the most important is audience: The rock audience has fundamentally changed. Part of it is just a

question of demographics: The 15-25-year-olds who were the core audience in the 1960s have aged along with rock music, and, now, for the first time, rock is being consumed with equal appetite by middle-aged, baby-boomers and teenagers (and everyone in between). The audience's age swing has called into question the traditional myth that rock is youth music, and, usually, rebellious youth music.

Another crucial change has been the new interactions between rock music and other media, especially television and film. Certainly the most noted mix of television and rock is rock video. The rise of rock video in the 1980s - MTV in the United States, MuchMusic in English Canada, and MusiquePlus in French Canada - gave the entire industry a jolt, and rock video helped push rock into the entertainment mainstream. Millions of people - from pre-teens to seniors - saw and heard rock music with more frequency than ever before, due to its new position on television. There was no shortage of complaints that MTV sold-out rock'n'roll - especially from critics in magazines like Rolling Stone. The birth of MTV spurred an avalanche of academic writing about video and rock music. For

example, the winter, 1986 edition of The Journal of Communication Inquiry devoted its entire issue to an examination of MTV¹ and E. Ann Kaplan's book, Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism & Consumerism² epitomized the new academic interest in rock video.

The other interaction between rock and television was the proliferation of rock music in commercials in the 1980s. The advertising industry began pillaging the back catalogue of most of rock's best-known artists, and, all of a sudden, Beatles songs were being used to sell running shoes on television. The use of rock in commercials was another blow to the standard rock ideology that equated the music with countercultural politics. A parallel development was the use of rock in Hollywood movies. From Elvis Presley to the Beatles right up to the Bee Gees and Saturday Night Fever, rock had always been tied to commercial movie-making. But it was only in the 1980s that that tie-in became explicit and routine. Movies like Top Gun used catchy hit singles to sell the movie, catchy rock videos to sell the single (complete with excerpts from the movie to - once again -

sell the movie, in this circular commercial system), and the whole process would help to propel the soundtrack album to the top of the pop charts. This was one more step into the mainstream for rock.

There have also been changes in the music itself that forced critics to re-evaluate their fundamental principles. By the end of the 1980s, the failure of punk rock was regarded by most critics as an indication that rock's radical potential was spent. Critic Tom Carson's "What We Do Is Secret: Your Guide to the Post-Whatever," which appeared in the fall, 1988 edition of the Village Voice Rock & Roll Quarterly, is a good example of the post-punk despair of much rock criticism. Writes Carson:

By now, the scene's insistence that rock matters can't register as anything more than an anachronism. Rock and roll's assimilation into the cultural norm was inevitable, but one side effect of the Reagan era has been that popular culture in general is also now establishment culture...it's mature show-biz, and that's all.

The other distressing trend - for critics, at least - was the increasing proliferation of sub-genres within rock. From rap to speed-metal to house music, there was a small,

self-enclosed musical form for every different fragment of the rock audience. Today's rock radio reflects this fragmentation, with targeted stations for each different genre (e.g. dance stations, hard-rock stations etc.), as Ken Barnes points out in his comprehensive essay, "Top 40 Radio: A Fragment of the Imagination."⁴

All these changes in the form and content of rock'n'roll have challenged the most basic concepts of rock criticism, and this challenge has contributed to the theoretical crisis of today's criticism. Chapter two of the thesis will address the crucial issues being debated in contemporary rock theory, and examine the different discussions that have arisen in critical circles over the past years. One of the hotly contested concepts in rock theory is the idea of "authenticity", the notion that rock music, at its best, can provide a pure, non-commercial slice of culture that is somehow more "real" than other entertainment forms. There are still many critics who adhere to some idea of authenticity. But it has also come under fire in recent years, with writers like Simon Frith proclaiming the death of authenticity. Frith writes:

To be authentic and to sound authentic is in the rock context the same thing. Music can not be true or false, it can only refer to conventions of truth and falsity...Like all monuments it [Bruce Springsteen's Live - 1975-1985] celebrates (and mourns) the dead, in this case the idea of authenticity itself.⁵

One of the cornerstones of rock theory has always been some notion of audience, often the idea that there is a unique rock'n'roll community that is different from the usual homogenous entertainment audience. Greil Marcus's Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music discusses the unique rock audience/community in typically utopian terms. Writes Marcus: "The audiences that gather around rock'n'rollers are as close to that ideal community as anyone gets."⁶ Those assumptions about audience have been turned upside-down by the fragmentation of today's rock scene, and by the increasing integration of rock within the overall entertainment industry. The element that links all the debates is the underlying understanding that contemporary rock music cannot be understood within the old theoretical frameworks. How contemporary rock criticism tries to construct a new critical framework or modify the old one is the subject of the following chapters.

Chapters three through six will examine contemporary rock writing in the media within the context of this theoretical debate. Before outlining the themes of these chapters, it seems appropriate to discuss the types of media texts that will be analyzed. The main corpus for analysis will be the major rock publications in North America: Rolling Stone, Spin, and the music section of the Village Voice. The research will be restricted to criticism published in these magazines over the last two years. It will also be interesting to look at some daily rock journalism: The two newspapers to be examined in the project will be The Gazette in Montreal and Toronto's Globe and Mail. The Thursday and Saturday editions of The Gazette will be the ones used for the research since most of the newspaper's rock criticism is published on those days. The most consistent forum for rock criticism in The Globe and Mail is the record-reviews section, which has been published on different days over the last two years, and so the editions of The Globe and Mail to be examined will be the ones which included the weekly record reviews. The daily newspaper research will also be restricted to criticism published in the last two years.

I have written about rock music for various Canadian publications for several years now, and my own experience as a rock writer will be brought up in the discussion of contemporary rock criticism. Specifically, my work as a rock critic for The Gazette, the Montreal Daily News, and on CBC Radio will be used to lend an added practical touch to the examination of today's rock criticism.

Chapters three through six will be organized thematically. Chapter three will look at the role of the rock critic: Is the rock writer's primary function to construct taste formations for the rock audience, or is the critic just another cog in the public-relations industry now such an essential part of the rock world? The critic usually fulfils both functions. Rock writing - no matter how critical - is still part of the gigantic publicity machine that surrounds any major rock release. Critics tend to be uneasy about this aspect of their profession and this uneasiness often pops up in their writing. Richard Meltzer, in his introduction to The Aesthetics of Rock, is forthright about the commercial side of rock criticism in his description of his early career as a rock writer. Writes Meltzer:

.....I'm at last invited to join the front rank of gainfully employed rock-writin' whores, an army of whom has been rising like scum since Summer of Love '67, ready and willing to the last manjack to shill shill SHILL for heinous corporate product, in the papers, mags, and press kits of Anglo-America.'

Rock criticism is a hybrid of aesthetic and commercial concerns. The countercultural origins of rock criticism are at odds with this commercial function, but this contradiction has always been part of rock journalism. For example, Rolling Stone started out as the most important voice of the 1960s American rock counterculture. But, even then, it relied almost exclusively on the recording industry to supply the advertising that allowed them to survive as a business, and that reliance definitely had an affect on some of the critical writing in the magazine. Robert Draper, in Rolling Stone Magazine: The Uncensored History, writes:

While generally free to lambaste musicians, the magazine's music writers refrained from criticizing record companies until the early eighties, when Rolling Stone no longer depended upon the industry's financial largesse.

Chapter four will examine the constraints inherent in current news practices and how they effect rock criticism.

This chapter will reflect my own journalistic experience, as well as the theoretical writing on the subject. Issues to discuss will include the different constraints faced by newspaper writers versus magazine writers; how deadlines effect rock criticism; the influence of the internal organization of newspapers and magazines; the effect of space constraints; the events bias of a daily newspaper; different editorial assumptions about the structure of rock articles; and different editorial assumptions about what the appropriate subject-matter of rock writing is.

Notions of audience and community are at the heart of much rock writing, and the relationship between the two sometimes-conflicting concepts is the subject of chapter five. Rock criticism was created based on the idea that the criticism was primarily directed at some - largely undefined - community of like-minded rock fans. That sense of rock community has become strained in recent years. Meltzer points out in an article on Lester Bangs that Bangs's sense of a unique subcultural rock community has little to do with the reality of today's rock world. Writes Meltzer:

Us? Well, hey I'm not exactly sure - the extended 'Lester family'? A contempo-fallen huddled mass of, I dunno, quasi-like-minded unreconstructed scenewarts and sillysillies? In any event, a heap of sufferin' cartoon humanity as absurdly fat-targeted and ill-defined as the unforgettable 'them' of pathetic hippie yore.'

One of the invisible links in the debate about the meaning of rock music is the relationship between journalistic rock writing and academic theory. This relationship will be the focus of chapter six, which is the conclusion of the thesis. Rock critics have always been overtly hostile toward the academic world and academics haven't paid much attention to rock journalism. Writes Frith:

There is still remarkably little cultural theory, Marxist or otherwise, that makes sense of the pop and rock process. Adorno remains, after nearly fifty years, the key referent (think, by contrast, of the development of film theory in the same period).¹⁰

One of the more interesting developments in recent years is the new interplay between academics and critics. It isn't usually explicit, but some theoretical concepts have filtered down from the academic discourse to the journalistic discourse. The relationship between academic debate and rock journalism is part of the wider relationship between rock writing and the theoretical

debate about rock'n'roll today. That relationship is at the heart of this thesis, and so it seems fitting to end the thesis by examining this issue. The goal of the research will be to try to make the connections explicit that tie together the music, the industry, the theoretical debates, and the rock criticism. The thesis is not an attempt to give a history of the theories of rock. Rather, the thesis will try to analyze contemporary rock writing within the framework of the theory (past and present). Thus, it will not be a guide to the theory, as much as a theoretical guide to rock journalism. One of the ideas behind the research is that theory cannot be separated from the practice of rock writing; that the theoretical dilemmas are very much at the heart of a lot of contemporary rock criticism.

ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER ONE

'IS IT STILL ROCK 'N' ROLL TO YOU?' THE CHANGING FACE OF ROCK MUSIC.

Seminal British pop theorist Nik Cohn wrote the obituary for rock 'n' roll back in 1969, with the pessimistic conclusion of his pop history, Awopbopaloobopaloopbamboom: Pop from the Beginning. In a 1987 Face interview, Cohn reiterated his belief that rock was finished.

There isn't that much to say about rock 'n' roll for Christ's sake...[pop culture is] dead as it used to exist, but it won't lie down because the image-makers and Rolling Stone writers won't let it lie down. There's too much money at stake....so they've got to keep the bloody corpse breathing somehow.

Critics have been writing about the death of rock for years now. But rock music shows no signs of disappearing. The critics's pessimism is the result of many substantial shifts in rock over the past two decades, and these shifts have called into question the basic principles of early rock theory. The structural transformations in the rock universe have challenged the idealistic roots of the rock criticism of the late-1960s/early-1970s.

At the core of much of the critical discontent is the changing rock audience. The optimistic populism of rock criticism has been severely hampered by the fragmentation of contemporary rock, as the music devolves into a myriad of subcultures.

Dave Marsh's complaint about this state-of-affairs in his introduction to The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made exemplifies critics' unhappiness with the fragmented world of rock today. Marsh writes: "As we near the nineties, there is barely a sense of dialogue within genres, let alone among them."¹

It is clear that there always was fragmentation in pop music, and that the monolithic rock audience was always something of a myth. In the 1960s, there was a big difference between Beach Boys' fans and Who fans, and there were different musical genres (e.g. surf music, acid rock, soul etc.). But it was still possible for one group - like the Beatles - to unite a large portion of the whole youth culture.

That's difficult to imagine today. Even this era's biggest star, Michael Jackson, cannot unite a pop audience the way the Beatles or Elvis Presley did. There are more sub-genres of rock than ever before, with music fans' allegiances torn between heavy metal, rap, house, pop, MOR, punk, post-punk, and various other musical hybrid forms. Contemporary radio mirrors this fragmentation, and there is a mind-boggling array of formats to satisfy the various audiences. Ken Barnes lists 25 different radio formats in his essay, "Top 40 Radio: A Fragment of the Imagination."¹

One major source of the current fragmentation is the changing demographics of the rock audience. People who were fans of rock in the 1960s are now in their late thirties or older, and many are still rock fans. But the music industry continues to cater to younger and younger tastes - with pop-rap acts like M.C. Hammer and New Kids on the Block appealing to the pre-teen crowd. The result is that the rock audience today ranges across a wide diversity of ages, and this has dealt a lethal blow to the concept that rock'n'roll is an exclusive youth culture phenomenon.

New York Times rock critic Jon Pareles commented on this new demographic twist in his decade-end wrap-up article in December, 1989. In "Rock's Own Generation Gap, From Paula Abdul to the Who," Pareles writes:

Rock, stereotyped as youth music, now has its own full-blown generation gap....In 1989 there was good music on both sides of the gap, and on the many fringes that have replaced the mainstream.⁴

One of the main causes of rock critic despair is the music's gradual move toward the mainstream of the entertainment industry. The old claims for rock as a countercultural force don't make much sense in the age of MTV, rock'n'roll TV commercials, and the omnipresent Hollywood rock soundtrack. Rock has reached a new, more mainstream audience via television and commercial cinema, and this shift has blurred the distinction between rock and other entertainment forms.

Rock video is often cited by unhappy rock critics as one of the major culprits in the mainstreaming of rock'n'roll. The headline for Rolling Stone's 1983 cover story on MTV perfectly encapsulated the critics' fears about music

video: "Inside MTV: The Selling Out of Rock & Roll."⁵ Marsh wrote a well-known article, "I Don't Want my MTV," which castigated MTV for being racist, ahistorical, and bland.⁶ Rolling Stone's official history of rock'n'roll, Rock of Ages, similarly dismisses MTV as a blight on the rock universe:

It was this attitude [rock is music not politics], combined with the apparently endless banality of all but the tiniest percentage of the videos being screened, that made the rise of MTV a fact to bemoan.⁷

A related development was the rise in the use of rock'n'roll in television commercials. Often, the commercials are hard to differentiate from the rock videos on MTV and MuchMusic because both forms borrow liberally from each other. Originally, the rock video used many techniques from the TV commercial, including rapid-fire cuts and eye-catching (but often meaningless) visuals. Then the commercials started looking like the videos, and it became quite common to use rock music in the commercials. At the same time, the rock stars began signing lucrative contracts with major corporations, and the stars - and/or

their songs - would appear in commercials. Some of the best-known examples were Michael Jackson's Pepsi ads, Whitney Houston's ads for Coke, and Madonna's controversial Pepsi campaign.

The trend blurred the line between art and commerce, and made it difficult to make any of the old claims about rock music as an authentic, rebellious form. The third significant interaction between rock and other media was the proliferation of rock soundtracks for major, mainstream Hollywood films. Rock'n'roll has always been used by Hollywood. It started with the early rock films of the 1950s like Blackboard Jungle, which featured Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock", and The Girl Can't Help It, which showcased a slew of '50s rock stars. The cross-pollination continued through the next two decades. But those older rock movies - especially in the 1960s - had a countercultural flavour to them: Movies like Easy Rider and Woodstock stood out quite radically when compared to typical Hollywood product of the time.

In the last decade, Hollywood producers have begun to rely

on rock songs to help sell their movies, and it has become more and more common to use the rock soundtrack as an integral part of the movie's marketing strategy. The single from the movie soundtrack has an advantage in its climb up the hit parade because of the movie tie-in, and, if the single makes it into the Top 40, it gives the movie a major box-office push. The rock video is a key component too, since the clip for the single can - and almost always does - feature images from the movie. Recent successful examples of this lucrative process include Top Gun, Dirty Dancing, and Pretty Woman.

Jody Berland argues in "Sound, Image and the Media: Rock and Social Reconstruction" that this link between pop music and the visual media is not a new trend, and that the industry has used the interaction to generate profits for decades. Berland writes:

To maintain this economic and geographic hegemony, the music industry turns, or rather finds itself extended to and through the differently structured apparatus of the visual media....This compulsion has been there from the invention of sound film.

It is irrefutable that pop music and the visual media have

been linked throughout the century. But the nature of the link has changed since the birth of rock'n'roll in the 1950s. Berland is correct to point out that movies were helping sell records and records were helping sell movies 40 years ago. Writes Berland:

Movie producers knew a good thing when they saw it and made a score of Rock-around-the-Clock clone movies that quickly condensed the rebellion into a structure of predictable motifs.

But at least there was a rebellion motif, even if it was manipulative. The contemporary use of rock music in movies doesn't even hint at rebellion, and that is the crucial shift. The music now serves an exclusively commercial function.

The natural extension of the use of rock in television advertising was the rise of corporate sponsorship of rock'n'roll. Corporate sponsorship is simply more sophisticated advertising: The company helps support an act - usually while they're on tour - and, in return, the firm receives publicity for its product. The tour support can range from cash to material backing, and the plug for the

company's product can range from banners at concerts to the presence of the company's logo on the posters to mentions of the sponsor on all of the tour press releases. The most frequent sponsors have been firms marketing cigarettes, beer, and soft drinks.

A couple of major rock stars have declined corporate sponsorship - most notably Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young (who even wrote a song about it, "This Note's for You") - but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Sponsorship has also caused no small amount of pessimism among fans and critics, who see the trend as one further dilution of rock's radical potential to be different from other mainstream entertainment.

The negative reaction of the agit-prop, rock magazine Rock & Roll Confidential to corporate sponsorship is representative of the critical discontent produced by the growth of corporate sponsors. The Rock & Roll Confidential editors write that:

RRC has led the opposition to this profit rake-off by making it clear that you can't shill and be taken seriously too. Partly as a result of such press criticism, many rock performers remain reluctant to accept such money. The reason they ought to remain reluctant - and the consequences and contradictions of being bought off - are detailed in the articles that follow.¹⁰

The state of rock music itself - rather than the state of the rock industry - has also caused a rethinking of traditional rock theory. The punk rock movement of the late 1970s is generally considered by critics to be the last gasp of genuinely rebellious rock'n'roll, and punk's inability to make much of a commercial dent in North America helped foster a lot of critical pessimism.

North American rock critics were a lot more enthusiastic about punk rock than regular North American rock fans. But most of the pro-punk critics were dismayed by the genre's lack of success on this side of the Atlantic. Tom Carson's essay on the Ramones third album, "Rocket to Russia", in the Stranded anthology reflects the critical euphoria of the era. Carson writes:

That summer [1977] was the high-water mark of the punk era....After that, though punk survived, it was no longer a revolution. But that hadn't happened

yet....Everyone was ready to believe that by the end of the year punk rock would have taken the Top 40 by storm, and brought the mainstream of the culture to submission in one quick and easy battle; it was the old fantasy of the American bohemian underground, of finally being accepted by the rest of the country - a dream much older than rock'n'roll itself....To be in New York that summer was to have some sense of what it might have been like to live in San Francisco in 1966 or '67, or in London when the Beatles and the Stones first hit.11

The Ramones never became more than critical and cult heroes, and punk, in general, had a limited direct influence in North America. Critics and fans have championed many musical causes since - notably rap, house, and speed metal - but the idealistic populism of the punk era is a thing of the past. Part of the reason for this critical transformation was the collapse of rock into a profusion of sub-genres, as was mentioned at the start of the chapter.

It is all the major changes in the rock culture taken together which have forced a fundamental re-evaluation of the basic critical concepts of rock theory. The shifting rock audience, the proliferation of different genres of rock, the mainstreaming of rock via other visual media

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(rock video, television commercials, Hollywood movies), the growth of corporate sponsorship, and - perhaps, most importantly - the changes within rock music itself have all contributed to the undermining of the fundamental, founding principles of rock criticism. The modifications in the theories surrounding rock music is the subject of the following chapter.

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CHAPTER TWO

TALK AROUND THE CLOCK: THE EVOLUTION OF ROCK THEORY

Critics began writing seriously about rock music in the mid-1960s. Rock criticism emerged first in the underground press, in publications like the L.A. Free Press, the Berkeley Barb, Crawdaddy, and, most significantly, Rolling Stone, which was the most successful of the countercultural magazines. Since then, rock criticism has entered the mainstream of journalism, and it is now standard for most newspapers and general-interest magazines to publish some rock criticism.

There have been a number of major shifts in the concepts and theories lurking in the shadows of rock criticism over the past 25 years. A large part of the theoretical evolution is related to rock criticism's move (along with rock music itself) from the counterculture to (or at least closer to) the mainstream media. In the 1960s, the political ideas of the hippie culture and the New Left had

a vital influence on the theories surrounding rock music. In general, it was taken for granted that politics and music should be discussed together, and much critical writing echoed the radical populism of the era.

It was in this context that Robert Christgau began a 1969 Village Voice column with the tongue-in-cheek lead: "Q: Why is rock like the revolution? A: Because they're both groovy."¹ The ensuing article by Christgau was not exactly overflowing with optimism about rock's revolutionary potential - in fact, the irony is quite evident in the quote - but the topic itself reveals a lot about the political pre-occupations of the era's rock critics. Christgau may have been sceptical about rock's radical power, but his writing in the 1960s was certainly inspired by the countercultural ideology of the time. Reflecting back on his criticism in the late-1960s in the collection, Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Other Pop Music, 1967-1973, Christgau writes:

I melded the communitarian rhetoric of the counterculture and the populist possibilities of pop into a sort of improvised democratic radicalism that functioned more as a sensibility than a theory.¹

Rock critics' faith in the radical power and populist potential of rock has been eroded since Christgau wrote those lines, as a result of changes in the music and the industry (as outlined in the previous chapter). Today's critics no longer automatically assume that rock should be analyzed within the framework of a social/political agenda. But the legacy of the countercultural ideology still lingers on a quarter of a century later, even if it has been seriously diluted by rock's move toward the mainstream culture.

The majority of the most influential theorists of the first two decades of rock criticism - Christgau, Simon Frith, Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh, Jon Landau - started writing in the heyday of the counterculture, and the influence of the beliefs of that era permanently affected their approaches to rock criticism. The radical optimism of the '60s may not be part of these writers' work today, but those concerns do still shape their writing.

In his 1983 study of the music industry, Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll, Frith explains his interest in rock in the following terms:

In Berkeley I found a culture in which rock and politics, music and the Movement, pleasure and action were inextricably linked. They have been so for me ever since...

One of the crucial developments in rock criticism was the shift from concentrating almost solely on the lyrics - sometimes to the exclusion of the music - in early rock reviewing to today's perspective which attempts to balance analysis of lyrics and the music. In the 1960s and well into the 1970s, it was taken for granted that the starting point of any examination of rock music was the lyrics of the songs. This trend could be seen in the first attempts of academics to analyze rock music. Rock was initially assumed to be another branch of literary studies, and, for a while, rock lyrics would turn up in various academic poetry anthologies. This led to a concentration of attention on songs with lyrics that were suitably poetic and "meaningful" - and led to the ignoring of songwriters with a more down-to-earth style of lyric-writing. '60s rock stars like the Beatles and Bob Dylan were, thus, considered to be artists more worthy of examination than their '50s predecessors like Chuck Berry and Little Richard because

the Lennons and McCartneys and Dylans had more consciously poetic/intellectual lyrics.

In his essay, "Why Do Songs Have Words?", Frith notes that there is a long sociological tradition - based on the content-analysis approach to studying culture - which concentrated almost exclusively on the lyrics of songs rather than the music. The analysis of rock lyrics as poetry shared the sociologists' tendency to concentrate on song lyrics, but the rock-as-poetry approach was based on a new set of assumptions about the music. Writes Frith:

From the start, rock's claim to a superior pop status rested on the argument that rock songwriters (unlike New York's Brill Building hacks and folk and blues circuit 'primitives') were, indeed, poets....Rock 'poets' are recognised by a particular sort of self-consciousness; their status rests not on their approach to words but on the types of words they use....Rock 'poetry' opened up possibilities of lyrical banality of which Tin Pan Alley had never even dreamt, but for observing academics it seemed to suggest a new pop seriousness....

Classic examples of this rock-as-poetry approach are The Poetry of Rock, edited by Village Voice writer Richard Goldstein, and the tellingly-titled Poetry of Relevance anthologies that put Joni Mitchell beside William Blake,

and John Lennon beside Dylan Thomas. But this trend toward lyrical analysis was not only taking place in academia; this type of criticism was also flourishing in rock journalism, especially in the record review section of Rolling Stone. It was not unusual for a critic like Paul Nelson to spend most of a record review examining the lyrics on an album and comparing them to classic novels and poetry. Often, the music on the album would be barely mentioned. As mentioned above, sociologists had been examining song lyrics long before the 1960s academic and critics came along and began analyzing rock "poetry". Dave Laing's 1969 work, The Sound of our Time, is a good example of a study of popular music that blends that sociological tradition with the literary-style analysis of lyrics-as-poetry that was popular at the time.

The first part of Laing's book is a sociological examination of the conditions of production of pop music during the last 100 years. But it is in the section on contemporary rock - "One Man's Opinion of Moonlight" - that his over-reliance on lyrics really comes to the forefront. There is a 20-page analysis of the Beatles' work that

concentrates almost exclusively on themes and issues raised by the lyrics in the Beatles' songs. Unlike the worst literary analysis of rock during this era, Laing at least has enough of a sociological bent to keep the social in mind when analyzing the lyrics. But there is almost no discussion of the Beatles music.

By the time he wrote One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock in 1985, Laing's analysis was better able to combine literary and musicological concerns mainly thanks to his use of semiology. Writes Laing:

Because it [semiotics] brings into equivalence all types of sign (written, spoken, sung, played, gestured), it offers the chance of showing how all of these combine together to produce an effect of pleasure (or displeasure) for an audience. It thus provides a way of avoiding the difficulties encountered frequently by purely musicological or purely linguistic analyses of popular songs. For each of these tends to privilege just one aspect of a song (the musical structure of chords, harmony, melody, etc or the meaning of the lyrics) to the detriment of the rest.⁵

Laing's attempt to balance an analysis of both the music and the lyrics is a stance that has been adopted by most of today's rock theorists, and the literary analysis of rock-as-poetry is much less common in contemporary rock

criticism. For example, Iain Chambers's point of departure in Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture is that pop's meaning is not limited to its lyrical content. As Greil Marcus put it: "Words are sounds we feel before they are statements to understand."⁶

The concentration on lyrics was one of the dominant trends in the rock criticism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and, in fact, though its influence has waned in recent years, it has never entirely disappeared from rock writing. The other important form of criticism that developed during the same era was a style of rock criticism based on an "auteur" analysis of rock, and, often enough, the auteur-style rock critics were the same critics who spent a lot of time analyzing rock lyrics (often comparing the lyrics of artists over their entire careers).

The auteur theory of rock was based on the idea that rock performers should be analyzed as artists, and that, like important painters or film-makers, rock performers will be creating a life's worth of work that has to be considered as a whole, connected body of material. This point of view

was essentially borrowed from film criticism, where the auteur theory was first formulated. In the late-1950s/early-1960s, critics at the Cahiers du Cinéma in France and American writers like Andrew Sarris constructed elaborate critical models to explain the mechanics of the auteur theory of film. Though rock criticism lacks such an explicit conception of the auteur theory, the approach was certainly the prevalent - if not the dominant - theoretical outlook during the 1970s and 1980s.

The most clear-cut example of the auteur-style analysis of rock could be found in the record review section of Rolling Stone magazine. Rolling Stone's key artists - performers like Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, the Who, Neil Young - were discussed with reference to their entire "oeuvre". The auteur approach influenced books like The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, in which most of the chapters are dedicated to the individual artists' careers, and the influence of the auteur theory can even be seen in Marcus's Story Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music, which is divided into six sections covering the work of six different artists.

(Though it is not fair to lump Mystery Train in with the standard auteur-type analysis since Marcus's groundbreaking book is as much a study of the social/political culture surrounding the music.)

Like the countercultural politics, the auteur bias has not completely disappeared from rock criticism and theory. Concentrating on rock stars is an easy way to approach writing about the music, and it is still the starting-point for much rock reviewing. A large part of the reason that this is the case is due to the rock industry itself. The publicity departments of record companies aren't interested in media coverage of trends and movements within rock music: They want coverage of their artists, in general, and, more specifically, they want coverage of the artists' new work (e.g. concert tour or album). Most media are also geared toward covering the stars rather than the music or trends or ideas. For example, the publishing industry realized that there were profits to be made by targeting the huge rock audience, but the mass-market firms tend to go for rock-star biographies rather than any other genre because the photo-heavy star bios are accessible to a

large audience and are more easily marketed than other types of rock-music books.

But the auteur theory has fallen out of favor over the last decade. Rock critics have been reprimanded for their over-reliance on an auteur-type frame of analysis, and the critiques of the auteur approach have used many of the same arguments that came up when the auteur theory in film studies was attacked; namely that the work of art - film in one case, music in the other - is never the sole product of one artist, but rather the result of a group process.

Dave Marsh makes this sort of anti-auteur argument in The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made, in which he castigates rock theorists for their tendency to focus almost exclusively on singer-songwriters because it is convenient for their analysis. Writes Marsh:

But that approach doesn't streamline the facts; it steamrollers them. Unromantic as it may be to say so, most great recordings aren't just the work of individuals, no matter how they're credited. Making music is most often the product of intense collaborations, in which powerful personalities play leadership roles but can't hog all the action.

Auteur theorist Sarris responded to this same type of anti-auteur argument in his essay, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (most of which was a response to André Bazin's attack on the auteur approach). For Sarris, any given film must be analyzed with reference to the director's other work, and it is necessary to attempt to expose the thematic and formal links between the director's different films.

One of the issues raised by Bazin vis-à-vis the auteur critics is the relationship between capitalism and cinema. The question is: Does the auteur theory ignore the influence of the social system on the cultural products? Sarris doesn't feel that the social - political/economic - forces play a determining role in the creation of culture. Writes Sarris:

He [Bazin] mentions, more than once and in other contexts, capitalism's influence on the cinema. Without denying this influence, I still find it impossible to attribute X directors and Y films to any particular system or culture....As for artists conforming to the spirit of their age, that spirit is often expressed in contradictions....If directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography.

The issue of the influence of the political-economic system on culture is just as relevant in any discussion of the auteur bias in rock criticism. One of the contradictions in the case of rock theory is that the rock critics were analyzing rock using a variant on the auteur theory, yet they were still attempting to bring in the social - or the political and economic - because linking the music with society was an essential element of 1960s rock theory.

Ironically, it was in fact economic shifts - movements within the music business in the mid-1980s - that forced critics to re-evaluate the auteur perspective over the past few years. In his introduction to Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s, the Village Voice critic suggests that "The '80s were when stars replaced artists as bearers of significance,"⁹ and Christgau bases this assertion on the notion that, during the past decade, it has become increasingly hard to talk about rock performers without reference to sales.

According to Will Straw, the recent questioning of the

auteur perspective is - at least in part - a result of changes within the rock industry. Writes Straw:

In the white rock music mainstream of the 1970s, the individual career and biography was the dominant grid through which new records were interpreted and marketed. In the mainstream of the mid-1980s, it was rather the case that performer identity and the discourses of celebrity in part constituted the trappings through which songs acquired the distinctiveness necessary to their success in the turnover of the pop charts. Star performer figures remained at the centre of popular music, but these succeeded each other in rapid sequence, and this succession was a function of the success of individual songs more than of artists.¹⁰

New York Times pop critic Jon Pareles echoed Straw's comments in a "Pop View" column, "The Incredible Shrinking Career of a Pop Star," in which he argues that fans' loyalty is not permanent in this age of high-tech marketing, and synthetic pop. Writes Pareles: "The 1980's and 1990 brought record sales to new peaks while the performers themselves tended to flash and burn out."¹¹

Pareles argues that the 1960s and the 1970s were the golden era of the album, when fans bothered to listen to albums from start to finish. Christgau took the argument one step further in a recent Village Voice piece on the 1980s, in

which he rashly proclaimed the death of the album. Whether or not the album is dead, it is clear that rock critics' belief in the auteur theory has been shaken up.

The concept of authenticity - that some rock music is somehow more pure and real than other more commercial forms of entertainment - has also taken a critical drubbing in recent years. Part of the reason for the move to debunk the idea of authentic rock'n'roll was the changes in the music and industry mentioned in the previous chapter. The argument against authenticity was also part of the more pessimistic view of rock's power that became the critical norm in recent years.

In his obituary for Elvis Presley in the Village Voice, Lester Bangs eloquently captured the sense of pessimism that was many critics' response to the fragmented, commercial world of contemporary rock. Writes Bangs:

I thought it was Iggy Stooze, you thought it was Joni Mitchell or whoever else seemed to speak for your own private, entirely circumscribed situation's many pains and few ecstasies. We will continue to fragment in this manner, because solipsism holds all the cards at present; it is a king whose domain engulfs even

Elvis's. But I can guarantee you one thing: we will never again agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis. So I won't bother saying good-bye to his corpse. I will say good-bye to you."

The failure of the punk-rock explosion of the late-1970s to truly shake-up the rock industry in North America was a lethal blow to the philosophy of authenticity. Punk made all kinds of arguments based on the dichotomy of authentic versus commercial music, and the terms of reference were quite similar to the discourse of authenticity contained in 1960s rock criticism. Quickie punk histories like Caroline Coon's breathless 1988: The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion, Julie Burchill and Tony Parson's hysterical "The Boy Looked at Johnny": The Obituary of Rock and Roll, and, most significantly, almost all the journalism in the British music weeklies like New Musical Express and Melody Maker during the punk era were overflowing with ideas about how the music of punk acts like the Sex Pistols and the Clash was more authentic than the much-scorned music of establishment pop stars like Rod Stewart and Elton John. The authenticity position was articulated most clearly in "The Boy Looked at Johnny", in which Burchill and Parsons

make a simplistic argument about how all great, pure, authentic rock'n'roll inevitably gets co-opted by the nasty, commercial elements within the rock world.

Burchill and Parsons contend that the punk movement very quickly squandered its authentic, radical roots, and sold-out to the greedy record business, which was hungry for a new profitable pop trend. For Burchill and Parsons, early Sex Pistols, the Tom Robinson Band, the first Patti Smith album, and X-Ray Spex are practically the only genuine punk articles: Everything that followed is considered to be opportunistic, commercial product. Burchill and Parsons write:

The mass of raw repressed energy, mutated into pockets of feverish action by the example of The Sex Pistols, was never a genuine movement - just a collection of non-starter rat-racers who didn't lack the greed for fame and fortune so patently obvious in the idols they professed to despise, just the Old Guard's technical proficiency. The advent of punk required not virtuosity of music, but of attitude - the new wave's only revolutionary reform was that now anyone could become a tax-exile. As punk rock became a potential product-shifter, bands began to brush up their own unique selling-points in the hope of tempting the best and biggest label in town.¹³

This is a familiar point of view, one that has been

articulated frequently in older rock theory (George Melly's Revolt into Style is a well-known early example) and is still a presence in more recent theory (Dick Hebdige's semiotic study Subculture: The Meaning of Style makes a comparable argument, though Hebdige is more concerned with fashion and social movements than with the music itself).

The fragmentation of rock culture, the collapse of auteur-type analysis of rock, and the death of authenticity are ideas that have influenced much current rock theory. Writers like Iain Chambers and Lawrence Grossberg analyze the music with reference to terms from postmodern discourse, and, yet, they still manage to retain some of the populist optimism of early rock writing. For Grossberg, the key concept is the notion that the rock audience plays an active, participatory role in the cultural arena. In his essay, "Rockin' with Reagan or the Mainstreaming of Postmodernity, or Who is 'The Boss' Anyway?", Grossberg writes: "We must still avoid falling back into an approach which fails to take the activity and context of the audience into account."¹⁴ Grossberg takes for granted that the audience is not passively swallowing rock music without

thought, and he posits the idea that - at the best of times - there is a genuine interaction between a rock performer and his audience.

In a departure from the earlier theories of rock that made explicit the connection between rock and politics, Grossberg posits the notion that rock music works on an affective level in the everyday lives of rock fans. In the same essay, Grossberg cites Bruce Springsteen as an example of a star who successfully articulates the affective structures that are key to his fans' lives, and Grossberg argues that Springsteen achieves this empowering interaction with his audience even though the fans realize that the claims to authenticity of earlier rock'n'roll are no longer valid. The most important element here is the link that Springsteen's music creates between fan and performer, and the contradictions that the affective impact raises.

Grossberg argues that the Springsteen fans aren't necessarily interested in the overt politics in his lyrics, but that the fans are still moved by the affective

structure that he articulates in his music and performance. According to Grossberg, the images in Springsteen's songs - of unemployment, of desperation - may be bleak, yet the force of his music manages to make an impact that is not entirely depressing, and leaves room for some sort of optimistic reading. Writes Grossberg:

But he does offer something, a glimpse outside, a bit of compensation for their affective terror and emptiness: namely, himself and his performance. For what is obvious, over and over in his performances, is that Springsteen cares about rock and roll and its audiences. In a certain sense, perhaps with an unavoidable touch of romanticism, his audience responds to the fact that Bruce has not broken his promise - albeit a small one in the context of global struggles.¹⁵

Simon Frith, in his essay, "The Real Thing - Bruce Springsteen", takes a much less positive/optimistic view of Springsteen's interaction with his audience. For Frith, Springsteen's music still attempts to construct an authentic discourse, and the audience is still buying the authenticity argument, even if the critics don't believe it anymore. Writes Frith:

In the end, though, what is peculiar about the Springsteen story is not its marks of a brilliant commercial campaign, but their invisibility....the most successful pop commodity of the moment, the Springsteen

Live Set, stands for the principle that music should not be a commodity....it is as if his presence on every fashionable turntable, tape deck and disc machine, his box on every up-market living-room floor, are what enables an aging, affluent rock generation to feel in touch with its 'roots'. And what matters in this postmodern era is not whether Bruce Springsteen is the real thing, but how he sustains the belief that there are somehow, somewhere, real things to be.¹⁶

For Grossberg, the crucial point is that rock can still have an affective impact and that this affective force can forge identities in a social context. Grossberg writes, in his essay, "Music Television: Swinging on the (Postmodern) Star":

Rock and roll empowers its fans by placing them into a particular 'affective alliance' which marks their difference, not in terms of their beliefs and values as much as their ability to struggle against the dominant moods of contemporary life without being able to rely on its languages.¹⁷

That's why, for Grossberg, a Springsteen concert can still be a satisfying experience even though the fan is aware of the contradiction of Springsteen's inauthentic authenticity. This argument is an attempt to show that the interaction between rock performers and fans is not as passive and apolitical as conservative critics make it out

to be. For Grossberg, rock can still be oppositional, even if it isn't explicitly political. Writes Grossberg:

It [rock and roll] radically reshapes the real, not merely symbolically, by placing the rock and roll apparatus in a (limited) struggle within and against the structures of everyday life.¹¹

This faith in the power of rock to enunciate affective structures that have an impact on fans is far removed from the naive optimism of early rock theory, but it is also quite different from the pessimism of some variants of postmodern rock theory.

E. Ann Kaplan's work is a good example of the pessimistic postmodernist interpretation of the contemporary rock world. Kaplan - who has written extensively about music video, in general, and MTV, in particular - takes for granted a much more passive, conservative rock audience than Grossberg does. For Kaplan, the MTV audience is a homogenous group, and she regards them as being more-or-less uniformly representative of the right-wing Reagan era. Kaplan sees very little active, participatory interaction between audience and performer. Kaplan writes:

With MTV we have a situation where the mass of the MTV audience bring to reception reading formations that by and large coincide with those that shape MTV texts.¹⁹

Kaplan labels MTV postmodernist because it is decentering, disorienting, distracting, and doesn't clearly articulate its position of address. According to Kaplan, MTV flattens out history by stealing from different historical periods without acknowledgement, and, thus, it fits into her definition of postmodernism as being ahistorical. She also regards many of the videos as examples of Jameson's idea of "pastiche", since they are disorienting and erase the boundary between high-art and commercialism. It is precisely MTV's confounding of high art technique and commercial ends that makes MTV postmodern, according to Kaplan. In general, Kaplan takes a very dark view of all of this, and her analysis represents one strain of postmodernist thinking on rock.

Iain Chambers's books Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture and Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience exemplify a much more optimistic postmodern reading of the new mass culture. Chambers examines pop music within the

context of the study of the more general popular culture, and Chambers shares Grossberg's concept that popular music (and popular culture) can be empowering. Like Grossberg, Chambers's position is based on the principle that the consumers of popular culture are not un-intelligent dopes, and that they can find creative, democratic uses for music and culture. Chambers writes in Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience:

Popular culture, through its social exercise of forms, tastes and activities flexibly tuned to the present, rejects the narrow access to the cerebral world of official culture. It offers instead a more democratic prospect for appropriating and transforming everyday life.²⁰

This type of work is part of a general trend of analyzing rock within the broader terms of the cultural studies field, and, in fact, Chambers's ideas about rock and pop culture are directly descended from Raymond Williams's concept that culture cannot truly exist apart from community. Art gains its power in a community setting, according to Williams. This is the "community of process" that he writes about in The Long Revolution,²¹ and this perspective is an influence on theorists and rock critics

alike.

Like much of the recent theory, Chambers is grounded in a point of view which takes for granted a post-auteur stance on the music. Chambers argues that this "less precise, more amorphous popular urban culture"²² and the concurrent technology involved "fragment the figure of the 'artist' and disperse the idea of any simple point of 'origin'."²³

Thus pop music is part of the popular culture landscape in most contemporary urban environments, and Chambers sets up this commercial, urban pop culture in contrast to the old, established "high" culture. It is clear that he feels that this new pop culture is more democratic and more empowering than the older official culture.

An interesting aspect of Chambers's thesis is that, although Chambers points out that this mechanical reproduction makes the concept of 'authenticity' obsolete, he is, in some ways, still making an argument for the 'authenticity' of the new popular urban culture. It is perhaps not the naive ideology of 'authenticity' developed

in early rock criticism - the idea that the more direct and truthful, the more artistically valid the performance - but Chambers still posits that this urban commercial culture is more relevant than the more artistically established "high" culture.

Chambers's concept of pop music as popular culture is derived from a postmodern sense of culture as urban "bricolage" and environmental fragments. But his championing of the democratic force of popular culture parallels the populist politics of the early rock critics. In Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Other Pop Music, 1967-1973, Christgau explained his decision to become a rock critic with the sort of argument that has many echoes of Chambers's evaluation of pop culture versus established, "high" culture. Writes Christgau:

I did come to understand that popular art was not inferior to high art, and decided that popular art achieved a vitality of both integrity and outreach that high art had unfortunately abandoned.²⁴

To underline the similarity of Chambers's 1980s view of pop music as an "authentic" slice of the larger popular culture

and Christgau's 1960s view of pop as positive, democratic popular culture is, of course, to gloss over the very real differences between the two outlooks. Chambers may be - intentionally or unintentionally - making an argument for the music as "authentic" culture, but it is an argument that is presented within a postmodern perspective that is quite distinct from the auteur/countercultural perspective of the rock criticism of that earlier period.

As Frith correctly points out in his essay, "Packeting the Lot: Notes on Art and Pop", postmodernism is a response to the breakdown of the countercultural consensus of earlier cultural theory. Frith goes on to argue that the crisis of postmodernism is a crisis for intellectuals, and it is not necessarily a crisis in the larger culture. Writes Frith:

....But what 'the postmodern condition' describes is a crisis in the very idea of cultural authority. The question is whether anyone has the right to evaluate art and literature and music, whether anyone can or should assess the 'meaning' of mass culture. If nothing else, postmodernism describes a loss of faith in previously taken-for-granted aesthetics arbiters, whether academic critics, the artistic avant-garde or the guardians of scientifically correct class-consciousness. The 'crisis' of postmodernism is, in other words, really a crisis for intellectuals (everyone else has more material problems on their minds).²⁵

The theorists are searching for an alternative to the 1960s ideas about rock and its radical potential, while attempting to maintain some sense of pop music (and popular culture) as a positive, possibly radical force in our society.

In a critique of E. Ann Kaplan's work on rock video in Screen, Andrew Goodwin echoes Frith's idea that postmodernist theory is a bid to explain the new post-countercultural pop order. Writes Goodwin:

These shifts towards a postmodern culture can be explained in sociological and demographic terms, as the break-up of counter-cultural formations, which leave today's youth and their adult counter-cultural defectors in a position that academic commentators find difficult to explain, precisely because they are locked into counter-cultural assumptions that no longer apply.²⁶

The contradiction remains that contemporary writers still end up making a case for pop music as a potentially powerful and empowering form of culture, in spite of the fact that the previous more idealistic view of pop has been

debunked. Frith, in his essay, "Art Ideology and Pop Practice", traces the ideological shift from the more traditional Marxist (read authentic) interpretation of rock to the more recent "avant-garde" - to use Frith's terminology - view of pop.

Within this more recent type of analysis, it is taken for granted that rock is a commodity; that it is part of the commercial, marketing world. But, even within this framework, Frith still manages to make an argument for the force of the music, and his guarded optimism is reminiscent of Grossberg's affective argument for rock's populist potential. Writes Frith:

It matters because it is an important way in which people, young people in particular, accommodate themselves to capitalism, accommodate themselves, that is, to the contradictions of capitalism.²¹

All of these theoretical debates have been swirling around in scholarly circles for the last couple of years, and, more and more frequently, have been making an impact in rock journalism itself. As Frith points out in "Art Ideology and Pop Practice", most of the debates about the

meaning of rock music over the past quarter of a century have been in the rock press, not in academia. Writes Frith:

What theories of pop there are have developed out of the day-to-day practices of pop itself, out of people's need to bring some sort of order and justification to the continuing processes of musical evaluation, choice, and commitment - whether such people are musicians, entrepreneurs, or fans. The practice of pop involves, in short, the practice of theorizing. Perhaps we should call the results low theory - confused, inconsistent, full of hyperbole and silence, but still theory, and theory that is compelled by necessity to draw key terms and assumptions from high theory...."

The following chapters will examine a cross-section of this low theory. Many of the debates in rock theory - the discussion of authenticity, the question of the politics of rock, the examination of the auteur theory of rock - have been articulated in the rock criticism published in newspapers and magazines. But rock critics have always had to balance their concern with theory with more practical concerns: The critic's writing has always been as much a part of the huge publicity machinery within the rock business as it has been part of a serious discussion of rock music. As Frith points out, the academics are only now catching up with the theoretical debates that have been an important part of rock criticism for the past couple of

decades. Issues like the auteur theory or the political potential of rock music were first discussed in the rock press, not in academia. But the rock critics' ability to discuss the rock theory is shaped by their media environment. They have to deal with the practical constraints of contemporary media production - like deadlines, for example - and they are constantly balancing the dual roles - commercial and critical - that are thrust upon any rock critic. The following chapters analyze this intersection of commerce, media production, and theory by examining some examples of rock writing within the framework of the theoretical debates discussed in this chapter.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Christgau, Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Other Pop Music, 1967-1973 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 94.
2. Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Other Pop Music, 1967-1973, op. cit., p. 6.
3. Simon Frith, Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll (London: Constable, 1983), p. 4.
4. Simon Frith, Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 117-118.
5. Dave Laing, One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock (Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press, 1985), p. ix.
6. Greil Marcus quoted in Iain Chambers, Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture (London: MacMillan, 1985), p. xi.
7. Dave Marsh, The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Single Ever Made (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. xiii.
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9. Robert Christgau, Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 3.
10. Will Straw, "The Contexts of Music Video: Popular Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s," Dec. 15, 1986, p. 9.
11. Jon Pareles, "The Incredible Shrinking Career of a Pop Star," The New York Times, January 13, 1991, p. H27.
12. Lester Bangs, Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 216.

13. Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, "The Boy Looked at Johnny": The Obituary of Rock and Roll (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.49.
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CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF THE CRITIC: MUSIC, BUSINESS, AND THE MUSIC BUSINESS

Several years ago, Robert Christgau remarked that the rock critic was located right at the bottom of the prestige totem pole at most newspapers, falling somewhere below the astrology columnist. Since then, the rock critic's prestige rating has increased, as rock coverage has become a more central part of the entertainment reporting in most newspapers and magazines. But the rock critic's role within the music industry and the media world is still new enough to raise a series of questions and issues, and any definition of a rock critic's function is still fraught with contradictions.

There are essentially two conflicting roles played by rock critics. Firstly, rock critics themselves like to believe that they are arbiters of taste; that their primary function is to construct taste formations for their readers

and, more generally, for the larger rock audience. In theory, the critic is there to provide the critical terms for any serious discussion of rock music, and it is this critical framework which has been the starting-point of most rock discourse. The second function fulfilled by the rock critic is a much less glamorous one: Rock criticism is also part of the huge amount of promotion surrounding rock music, and the critics' writing is part of the public-relations industry that is an integral part of rock music today. All rock criticism is part of the P.R. that accompanies any rock event - e.g. the arrival of a new star, the release of a new album, or a concert tour - even though most rock critics would be less keen to acknowledge this aspect of their work.

This uneasiness with the P.R. side of their critical writing is a constant shadow lurking behind much rock criticism. Typically, a writer will attempt to downplay the commercial aspect of his or her job, and attempt to compensate for it by emphasizing his or her ability to differentiate between uninteresting, commercial music and more authentic types of rock.

Rolling Stone writer and MTV host Kurt Loder attempts to make just such a distinction in his collection of journalism, Bat Chain Puller: Rock & Roll in the Age of Celebrity. Loder briefly describes his work at Rolling Stone - as the author of the gossip "Random Notes" column - and he makes it fairly clear that this rock'n'roll party beat wasn't exactly the high point of critical rock writing. But then Loder launches into a diatribe against the excesses of rock celebrities, and he outlines how rock stars like Mick Jagger and Elton John have helped dilute the original radical power of rock'n'roll. Writes Loder:

Rock stars were no longer looked upon as cultural prophets or youth spokesmen or any of those other tired Sixties concepts. Now they were merely famous.....And over the course of the decade, a very clear message was sent: rock & roll - like everything else, it seemed - was for sale.¹

Loder sets up these rock celebrities as examples of artists who have sold-out, and he contrasts them with those few rockers who have managed to maintain their authentic character. "Some, like Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, remain paragons of integrity,"² argues Loder.

This is a case of a writer trying to construct the classic rock-critic aesthetic dichotomy. On one side, there is good authentic rock; on the other, there is bad, commercial rock. But this black-and-white portrait of rock fails to take into account the fact that the critic is also part of this commercial rock world, and the irony is even more glaring in the case of Loder, who is a host on a rock-video network which is not exactly known for its critical bite. In fact, the pieces in Bat Chain Puller - all of which were originally written for Rolling Stone - are fairly representative of that magazine's penchant for light, pop-star profiles.

Loder's discussion of authentic rockers - e.g. Dylan, Springsteen - versus inauthentic, commercial rock celebrities - e.g. Mick Jagger, Elton John - is part of a relatively common critical argument, but it is worth pointing out that this outlook is a reflection of an American perspective on rock. It is a view less frequently articulated in the British music press, which tends to look more critically at the notion of authenticity. As Simon Frith points out in "Art Ideology and Pop Practice", this

British perspective is, at least partly, a result of the British pop tradition itself, which has - from the Beatles to David Bowie to the Pet Shop Boys - exhibited a sense of irony and distance not found in most mainstream American rock. Writes Frith:

Rock arguments in the 1960s thus focused on the problem of commercial "co-option," the transformation of culture into commodity, and on rock's relation to certain sorts of organized political struggle, to protest. Rock was thought to be, under certain conditions, and despite the constant process of capital's recuperation, socially subversive. Or at least it could be, and was therefore an important site of struggle. Today, such arguments have lost their force (in Britain, that is; in the United States they still have resonance, hence the continued importance of rock heroes like Bruce Springsteen and John Cougar Mellencamp....)

But Loder's profound ambivalence about the prevalence of commerce in contemporary rock music echoes a common theme in much newspaper and magazine rock criticism. In practice, most rock criticism combines aspects of the commercial, marketing role and the ideal of constructing taste formations, and the mix of the two roles varies quite widely. The type of magazine or newspaper where the criticism appears is perhaps the most important factor in determining this mix.

In trade papers like Billboard in the U.S. or The Record in Canada, the commercial aspect of the rock criticism is dominant to the point of (almost) excluding the taste-formation role. These trade critics review albums with a specific audience in mind - other professionals in the music business - and aesthetic considerations definitely take a back-seat to commercial reflections. The Record's review of British dance-rock band EMF's debut album, Schubert Dip, is a good example of this kind of business-oriented rock criticism:

By now, music insiders know what the letters EMF stand for, and what the heavily-hyped group have achieved since their launch in late December 1989. The British quintet's dance rock orientation seems to endear them to modern rock, campus radio and the clubs - and it's our forecast that they'll shortly shatter CHR complacency with at least three strong singles - Unbelievable, I Believe, and Children. This group is multi-playlisted, multi-formatted, and going to be multi-charted!***1/2'

That the trades have consumer-guide-type reviews is no big surprise; but a magazine like Rolling Stone often runs rock criticism that, while obviously written for a more general audience of rock fans, shares some of the trade's consumer-guide features. This is certainly a major change from the

early days of rock criticism in Rolling Stone in the late-60s/early-70s, when the album reviews tended to be long (often long-winded) political/literary analyses of the musical texts. Now the reviews tend to be much shorter, less esoteric, and they even use the same sort of star-system to rate the albums just like in The Record.

A 1989 Rolling Stone review of the David Bowie CD-boxed set, Sound + Vision, is a representative example of this type of consumer-guide reviewing. The main point of Jimmy Guterman's review is that you - the consumer - will get good value for your money if you buy this compilation, or any of the other Bowie CD re-issues. He writes:

Rykodisc's Bowie re-issues will certainly be worthwhile - the label has a rich tradition of adding value to its rereleases - and Sound + Vision is a bold, promising beginning to the series.⁵

Globe and Mail rock critic, Alan Niester, shares Rolling Stone's tendency to review albums with a consumer-guide approach, and he rarely engages in wider discussion of the cultural or social contexts of the music. Niester's review of last year's Led Zeppelin boxed-set compilation is

typical: He details what exactly is in the set, compliments the record company on the packaging, and makes a few minor complaints about the song selection. His conclusion is that the Led Zeppelin discs are worth buying. Writes Niester:

But overall, this would seem to be more a labor of love than a labor of opportunism, and will undoubtedly be affectionately welcomed under the ol' Christmas tree when that time comes.

In stark contrast to this type of non-critical rock reviewing, there is the rock criticism that is concerned - sometimes obsessed - with notions of authentic rock, and these rock critics spend their time interpreting the music within the framework of a philosophy which equates good music with genuine, emotional expression and bad music with superficial, commercial product. There is a broad range of agreement among these critics as to which acts fall on which side of the aesthetic barricade. For example, rockers like Springsteen, Mellencamp, Steve Earle, Peter Gabriel, and Sinead O'Connor are generally considered to be models of good, authentic musicians. On the other side of the fence, performers like Vanilla Ice, Milli Vanilli, and New Kids on the Block are regarded by critics as examples of

the nefarious commercial side of the music biz.

It is no coincidence that all the critics' favorites happen to be more-or-less traditional rock'n'rollers, whereas the critics' favorite targets of abuse happen to come from the dance-pop side: Rock criticism has contained a fair amount of hostility toward dance music ever since the disco era of the late 1970s, and the dance genre has always been given a much smaller amount of critical coverage in the rock press than traditional rock. Sarah Thornton, in "Strategies for Reconstructing the Popular Past", details the lack of dance/disco coverage in much critical rock writing. Writes Thornton:

Disco music has fallen out of histories of recent popular music because it lies outside the canons of relevant, radical and innovative music, espoused by rock journalism (and much pop scholarship).¹

The treatment of poppy glam hard-rock/heavy-metal band Poison is the perfect example of the rock critic consensus on authentic versus inauthentic rock: These video stars are regularly castigated by critics for the music's perceived lack of emotional depth and authentic sentiment, and the

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critical line on Poison is that they represent the worst kind of commercial hard rock.

Montreal Gazette rock critic Mark Lepage's review of Poison's most recent concert in Montreal does not deviate from this critical consensus, and his critique of the band's Forum show reflects many of the common complaints about Poison's music. Lepage's piece even alludes to the critical unanimity about Poison. He writes:

It's not easy being Poison, but I guess somebody has to do it. They have to do it because being Poison means selling millions of albums of fourth-hand trash metal, selling 13,000 tickets to the Forum in mid-recession and keeping rock critics in business....In fact, aside from one bright instance of adolescent honesty, Poison's attempts to come on as a serious hard-rockin' party band only showed the rickety framework beneath the flashy facade.

Lepage's review is clearly an attempt to articulate a set of aesthetic criteria for judging rock; in this case, the taste formation that is being constructed is based on the idea that commercial (meaning bad) bands like Poison have very little connection with the real, genuine power of rock'n'roll. This sort of criticism would not likely appear in a trade publication's review of Poison, but it could

well show up in a magazine like Rolling Stone. Though Rolling Stone's reviewers do lean toward a homogenous, consumer-guide style today, the critics do still try to influence and shape the tastes of the rock public. Once again, it is a case of the taste formation role rubbing shoulders with the commercial role in the critical writing.

Sometimes the influence of commerce can be explicit. For example, a record company might threaten to pull their advertising from a publication because of an unfavorable article, which has certainly happened. This is a situation most often faced by smaller media. In 1991, Rolling Stone is powerful enough not to have to worry about whether or not an offended record company will stop advertising with them. But, as Robert Draper points out in Rolling Stone Magazine: The Uncensored History, that economic censorship was more prevalent in the magazine's early days, and became less of a factor in the 1980s "when Rolling Stone no longer depended upon the industry's financial largesse."⁹

This direct commercial pressure is not an issue for a daily newspaper rock critic, since the rock-music advertising in

a newspaper is generally only a very small percentage of the overall advertising content. But the promotional hype associated with any rock happening almost always has some influence on the rock criticism, though it is often on an unconscious level. Critics depend on the record companies and public-relations firms to supply them with material on the artists - including albums - and critics don't like to jeopardize those relationships. In the worst case scenario - and, frankly, it may not be the case all that often - the critic tones down his or her criticism so as not to offend the P.R. people. What does happen more often is that the critic feels some obligation to cover an artist because of the record company/P.R. push. The coverage may indeed be negative, but at least the artist is receiving space in the publication, which is usually all the publicists care about.

At the other end of the spectrum from the mainstream media which are under constant pressure from the music biz is a punk fanzine like Maximum Rock'n'Roll. The Berkeley, California-based monthly is printed on inexpensive newsprint, and its masthead proudly proclaims that no one

at the magazine makes a salary, and no profits are pocketed from the operation. They review independent releases, and their policy is that they will only review records provided to them on vinyl.

Though immune from major-label influence, fanzines like Maximum Rock'n'Roll have always had as strong a consumer-guide slant as the mainstream reviewers. The only difference is that the fanzine critics are writing with a different - i.e. more carefully targeted - audience in mind. A recent issue of Maximum Rock'n'Roll contained eight pages of record reviews, and the very-short, capsule critiques of indie product immediately let the consumer know whether the record is worth buying or not. The review of Blister's "Stitches" EP is typical:

This is a great little record: cool package and two excellent songs from ex-members of Christ on Parade and others. This has cool bits of sampling, harmonica, great musicianship, excellent lyrics that really fit the intense, heavy, intricate music beneath. Just buy it, basically.¹⁰

Their negative reviews are just as snappy, unpretentious,

and to-the-point, as exemplified in a recent review of Active Minds' "Capitalism is a Disease":

I'm sorry but it's just not my thing. Ten penny production, lifeless drum programming and uninspired arrangements. A tight budget and minimal line-up (two members if I'm not mistaken) may account for some of the more obvious glitches but that's no real excuse. Serious demo tape material.¹¹

Ironically, if you ignore the punk ideology, a Maximum Rock'n'Roll review can almost be regarded as a scrappy, street-wise version of a trade review. Maximum Rock'n'Roll journalists are writing for alternative rock fans and The Record journalists are writing for industry people, but the format of the reviews is the same: Short, direct evaluations of whether the discs are worth the readers money and attention or not.

Comparing critical responses to rock events can sometimes provide some insight into different critics' sense of their roles within the rock world. The controversy that erupted around Milli Vanilli in 1990 generated a tremendous amount of press coverage, with most rock critics weighing in with their aesthetic and political opinions on the Milli Vanilli

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scandal - or Milligate, as some writers sarcastically dubbed it.

The European pop duo Milli Vanilli had one of the most popular dance albums of 1990, and the Girl You Know It's True album - a high-tech, pop-rap disc - had garnered the group a Grammy Award as Best New Artist. There had been some grumbling about lip-syncing right from the start of the Milli Vanilli success story. The band and their German producer, Frank Farian, eventually came clean and admitted that the two members of Milli Vanilli - Rob Pilatus and Fab Morvan - did not sing a note on the album, and they were only used as front-men for the videos and concert appearances. In response to this perceived duping of the public, the Grammy organizers decided to strip the group of their Grammy win, and the Canadian Juno organization - which had also given them a trophy - followed suit shortly thereafter.

The critical response to the Milli Vanilli case was a good example of rock critics attempting to use their position as arbiters of taste, as they tried to set the tone for the

public discussion of the issue by passing judgement on the band's actions. In fact, the widespread condemnation of Milli Vanilli by rock journalists did probably influence the attitude of many rock fans' to the whole affair.

One of the most common critical reactions was to ridicule the band. A typical example of this was Rolling Stone's piece in January, 1991, "The Milli Vanilli Wars: A who's who guide to the principal players," which gave a tongue-in-cheek synopsis of the major figures in the controversy. Writer Jeff Giles jokes: "One kept expecting some hairstylists' association to turn up and revoke the pair's hair extensions."¹² The article concludes by quoting a Top Ten list of "New Jobs for Milli Vanilli" from David Letterman's show, and Giles's point seems to be that the entire incident does not deserve to be taken seriously because it is so obviously a transgression of all the codes of correct rock behaviour.

An article in Spin the following month takes the concept of ridiculing Milli Vanilli one step further. Mark Blackwell and Bonz Malone's "Milli Vanilli: The Mourning After" is

billed by the magazine as a "satire", and it purports to be the transcript of Milli Vanilli's answering machine tape. The editorial note at the beginning of the article sets the tone for what follows: "Note: We can't be sure it's really them, having never actually heard their voices."¹³ Again, the not-too-subtle hint is that Spin - like Rolling Stone - doesn't see fit to take the Milli Vanilli affair seriously. Partly, this is a result of the fact that Milli Vanilli were never accepted within the rock critics' pantheon of relevant artists, even before the lip-syncing scandal. Milli Vanilli's perceived marginality to the "serious" rock community is one of the factors that explains why these articles don't even bother earnestly attacking the group: One has the sense that it would be considered to be a much more serious offence if the wrongdoing had been committed by a critical favorite like Neil Young or Bob Dylan. These two articles are illustrations of critics endeavoring to set-up a set of taste formations for public discussion of an artist or issue; in this case, Milli Vanilli's music is clearly regarded as being so far below the accepted critical standards as to not warrant weighty attention. This is an example of how the taste

formations constructed by the rock critics can limit the range and type of discussions that take place in their writing.

But many rock critics did not take such a light-hearted approach to analyzing the Milli Vanilli scandal. Some critics - and, subsequently, fans - thought that Milli Vanilli's lip-syncing was one more shameful symptom of what had gone wrong with rock music in recent years, and that the Milli Vanilli story exemplified the worst trends in contemporary pop music. Gazette rock critic Mark Lepage's analysis of the Milli Vanilli story is an illustration of a critic endeavoring to construct a set of taste formations for his audience, and, in this case, he does it by aggressively denouncing the group for what Lepage regards as their blatant disrespect for their audience.

Lepage is willing to make a few barbed jokes at Milli Vanilli's expense - like the Spin and Rolling Stone writers - but the theme of his November 22, 1990 article, "Milligate cynicism leaves fans with a syncing feeling", is that Milli Vanilli's behaviour has violated the ethical rules of the rock game. For Lepage, it is a topic that

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deserves serious treatment, and there is a sense of outrage in his words. Writes Lepage:

If there really is an issue of false representation here, it belongs in criminal court, not before the toothless Grammy review board. If you sell me a car without an engine, my lawyer and I take you to court and take all your money. It's called fraud, and some duped Vanilli fans in California have already filed lawsuits.¹¹

In this instance, Lepage is evidently taking his role as taste leader quite earnestly: The sense is that the Milli Vanilli controversy is no joking matter because it is setting a very negative precedent for future pop music. Lepage's perspective isn't that unique, and there certainly were no shortage of rock critics who shared Lepage's outrage over the scandal.

Not all media coverage of the Milli Vanilli tale fell into these two camps just mentioned - i.e. jokey condescension or genuine indignation. These were the two most common reactions articulated by rock critics, but there were other journalists willing to take a different view of the matter. Often, these journalists tended not to be rock critics. For example, the articles in The Gazette and The Globe and Mail that explored interpretations that differed from the rock-

critic consensus on the issue were written by journalists from outside the rock world.

In The Gazette, it was Peter Pearson - the film and television producer who writes a weekly column on cultural politics - who dared to challenge the anti-Milli-Vanilli forces, and suggest that perhaps the group were not villains so much as symptoms of the new entertainment order. Pearson's argument is that all forms of contemporary culture - including film, television, and pop and classical music - use different forms of mechanical reproduction that take the art-forms away from their live roots, and, thus, it is hypocritical to condemn Milli Vanilli for not singing on their Girl, You Know It's True album. Pearson writes:

But both professionals in the business and audiences know very well that in fact almost all production of music (and film for that matter) is technically altered, and has been for years.¹⁵

In some ways, Pearson is making an obvious point: That technology has changed over the past century, that it is changing all the time, and that these technological advances (or regressions, depending on your critical

perspective) have had significant effects on the various art forms. But it is not a point-of-view expressed all that often in the rock press, where it is more common to see more emotional attacks (and defences) of the actions of performers. Pearson's acknowledges the divide that separates his analysis from much of the analysis of the Milli Vanilli phenomenon. Writes Pearson:

Technology now drives all the electronic media. The moment you embrace it, you are involved in falsification. The anguish and anger expressed about Milli Vanilli seems to have its real roots in a sort of nostalgia for a time when pop art seemed much less plastic and disposable.¹⁶

Robert Everett-Green - who writes about classical and contemporary music, and other cultural matters for The Globe and Mail - makes a similar argument in a column on Milli Vanilli, and his piece - like Pearson's - reveals a perspective that is very far removed from the usual rock-critic view on the lip-syncing issue. Everett-Green also makes the point that technology has fundamentally changed the music world, and he cites the widespread use of digital sampling - which is the process whereby a computer can pirate a riff, chorus, or any other element from a piece of

music - as a prime example of the increasing murky definition of originality in contemporary pop music. For Everett-Green, the industry's denunciation of Milli Vanilli smacks of a double-standard: They attack Milli Vanilli for falsifying their music, yet the practice of creating simulated, non-live music is now the norm in the music biz. Writes Everett-Green:

The system favors slick producer-driven ventures, yet had to be seen to disapprove when MV's producer decided to fly in vocals in an unsubtle manner. The industry loves gadgets that cut down on payments to live musicians, but it fears the gadgets' potential for anarchy, and knows that copyright laws have not begun to adjust to the low-level piracy that is going on every day. An opportunity for ritual denunciation of fakery thus suits the pop establishment very well, for it allows the industry to state the rules without actually committing themselves to live by them.¹⁷

Everett-Green's analysis helps illuminate the hidden connection between the rock critics' role as a creator of taste formations and the critics' role as a commercial link between the industry and the audience. In the case of Milli Vanilli, the rock critics - like Lepage in The Gazette - are making arguments about Milli Vanilli which imply a set of aesthetic codes about rock music, and, obviously, Milli Vanilli are regarded as faring poorly in terms of most of

these aesthetic evaluations. The argument is an attempt to influence the journalists' audience and - more broadly - the rock audience. But, as Everett-Green's column points out, this critical point of view - which is clearly an effort to create a set of taste formations - also fits in quite nicely with the music industry's desire to make a scapegoat of Milli Vanilli to assuage public opinion, while continually using the latest technology to construct profitable forms of studio-enhanced music.

The intersection of art and commerce exemplifies the position of the rock critic: The purist, art-for-art's-sake position is the public articulation of the rock critic; the commercial, public-relations function of the critic's discourse is more below-the-surface, and is not readily acknowledged by the critic. As can be seen in the case of the critics' reaction to the Milli Vanilli scandal, the commercial aspect of the critic's role - or, to put it another way, the industry's influence on the critical discourse - is a subtle force that is the result of the ongoing interaction between rock critics and the music industry. It is almost never a conscious attempt by the

critic to toe some sort of industry party-line, nor is it a case of the industry P.R. flaks directly trying to mold the critical texts.

Obviously, there is large spectrum of viewpoints within rock criticism, going from the straight business-slant of a trade publication like The Record at one end of the scale to the radical, anti-establishment viewpoint of an alternative, underground magazine like Maximum Rock'n'Roll at the other end of the scale. The critics emphasize different aspects of their roles in these two opposing types of publications, though - as mentioned earlier - there are even similarities between two such different rock media outlets.

In the middle of the spectrum are the mainstream rock magazines like Rolling Stone or Spin, and the rock criticism in daily newspapers like the Gazette. Here, the influence of commerce is less direct than in a trade publication and the influence of purely aesthetic/political considerations is less direct than in a punk fanzine. The power of the commercial interacts in the critical writing

with the force of the critic's attempt to construct an authentic, aesthetic taste guide.

This interaction of the commercial and the aesthetic is a central component of most rock criticism. The rock writers tend to be uneasy with the commercial, marketing aspect of their profession, and, thus, they often go out of their way to attack the marketing campaigns associated with rock artists. Yet even these critical pieces remain part of the marketing around any rock event; the old showbiz adage that "any coverage is good coverage" is the philosophy of many rock publicists. The commercial role of the critic can also limit the critics' analysis of rock: The newspaper rock critic, for example, has to review the new Bruce Springsteen album, and, most likely, review it in some detail. But that often means that the lesser-known rock releases don't receive the coverage, and the necessity of reviewing the Springsteen release - or the latest Def Leppard - forces the critic to stick to the mainstream of the rock industry. It makes it harder to cover more off-the-beaten track events or to try to make sense of larger pop trends.

But the massive marketing machinery of rock is only one of the pressures that restricts the vision of rock critics. Rock writers are also confronted by a whole range of constraints created by the structures, rules, and biases of the media organizations that publish the rock criticism. For example, the deadlines faced by newspaper reviewers writing late-night concert reviews can have a significant impact on the style and content of the article. The impact of the practical constraints facing rock critics - from late-night deadlines to the editorial structure of newspaper entertainment sections - is the subject of the following chapter.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRACTICE OF ROCK JOURNALISM: CONSTRUCTING ROCK'N'ROLL NEWS AND REVIEWS

Rock criticism is not created in a vacuum. Rock'n'roll journalists work for large and small media outlets, and their writing is influenced by the constraints, pressures, and biases of these media organizations. The constraints that are an integral part of working for a magazine or newspaper have a direct, often significant effect on the journalist's writing, and, hence, on rock criticism itself. The constraints associated with writing for a magazine are quite different from those connected with a daily newspaper, for example, and the constraints often differ quite notably between news and entertainment departments in these media organizations. But, in all these cases, the journalist's output is created within an organizational framework that colours the kind of journalism that is being published.

Perhaps the most important constraint on a rock critic's writing is the editorial structure and outlook of the publication. The critic - in almost all cases - is subject

to the authority of an editor or group of editors, who usually have definite, a priori ideas about the type of articles that they like to see in their newspaper or magazine.

In Understanding News, John Hartley outlines a paradigm of news values to attempt to explain how editors decide what to publish in a newspaper or broadcast on the news. These news values are used to judge which events are newsworthy and are worthy of inclusion. For Hartley, this paradigm is discussed primarily in relation to "news", as opposed to "entertainment", but many of the same value judgements take place in the entertainment or cultural sections of newspapers and magazines.

The first news value mentioned by Hartley is "frequency": "The time-span taken by an event."¹ The idea is that events that are covered by the media have to take place in a finite, preferably short time-span. Hence, it is more likely that an event - like a murder - will be covered rather than an economic or social trend, which occurs over a long period of time. Certainly, this value helps shape

the construction of rock stories in newspapers and magazines. An event like a concert, for example, happens within a defined period - usually one night - and thus it is easy for the critic - and the editors - to cover the event. Reviewing concerts is one of the staples of daily newspaper rock journalism precisely because it is such manageable form of rock writing. It would be much more difficult for the critic to examine long-term changes in rock music or in audience behaviour, and, without the frequency value, a story like that is much harder to "sell" to an editor (i.e. convince the editor to publish it), in any case.

The second news value that Hartley mentions is "Threshold: The size of an event."² The notion here is that events that aren't "big" enough - in terms of people effected, people involved, readers interested - will not receive coverage within the mainstream media. Once again, this is a major factor in most rock writing. In the case of concert reviewing, the rule-of-thumb for editors and critics is that the larger the event, the more prominent the coverage will be. For example, a concert at Montreal's Olympic

Stadium will be given high-profile play in The Gazette: Quite possibly, the story will appear on page one, certainly it will make it on to the entertainment break page. Moving down the ladder of importance - in terms of the threshold value - a concert at the Forum will also be given big play on the entertainment break page, though it is unlikely to make page one. Then come the club shows, which will generally be given less prominent coverage, and, in fact, the majority of club concerts don't receive any coverage at all in a newspaper like The Gazette.

The "threshold" idea is echoed in Gaye Tuchman's discussion of "the news net" in Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality. Tuchman brings up the metaphorical concept that news organizations toss out a net to gather news. "But a net has holes,"³ adds Tuchman, and so it follows from that that the news media never actually gather in all the possible news that is happening in the area they're covering. Tuchman goes on to state that "Today's news net is intended for big fish,"⁴ meaning that news media tend to concentrate on events that are judged significant by the editors. These news stories often

originate "at legitimated institutions"⁵ like police headquarters, city hall, the courts, and so forth.

In rock writing, these legitimated institutions are the major concert halls, the major record labels, the established retail outlets, and the publicity firms. As is the case in news gathering, the rock news net does not secure all the rock news that is taking place, and - due to the threshold bias - the coverage tends to focus on the large-scale, mainstream, commercial side of the rock music world. In other words, it is much more likely that a popular rock band playing the Forum will be reviewed than a less-popular rock band performing at a smaller club.

Tuchman lists three assumptions about readers' interests that are made by the news media when constructing their news net:

1. Readers are interested in occurrences at specific localities.
2. They are concerned with the activities of specific organizations.
3. They are interested in specific topics.⁶

In fact, the range covered by the news net for rock writing is probably even more narrow than is the case for news

reporting. New reporters cover a variety of localities; the rock critic is - for the most part - restricted to the concert halls and clubs where the critic goes to review shows, the hotel rooms where the critic interviews rock artists, and, occasionally, record stores to do an article on the launch of a major album. The assumption is that readers are only interested in rock stories originating in these localities, and this editorial bias (or set of assumptions) entails ignoring a wide range of other localities that are potential sites for rock stories.

When the rock critic ventures outside the usual set of localities and topics, the result is a type of rock criticism that is not seen very frequently in daily newspapers. For example, Gazette rock critic Mark Lepage's article on the loss of Top-40 radio in Montreal, "990 Oldies is no hit with young listeners"¹, stands out in contrast to the usual rock-performer profiles and reviews that populate daily newspaper rock writing. In this article, Lepage interviews students at a Montreal high school who are dismayed that local Top-40 radio station CHTX/990 Hits has changed its name to CKIS/Oldies 990 and

its format to golden oldies. The article manages to examine wide-ranging trends in pop music and the wider popular culture - the disappearance of hit radio, the predominance of nostalgic rock in the music industry, the control of the media by one age group (the baby boomers) - and, unlike much of the other rock writing in newspapers, the article is not directly linked to promotion for a specific rock artist. The form of the story is actually borrowed from news reporting - it is essentially "a streeter", which is the type of article based on interviews with "average" people commenting on news issues. But Lepage's article on the death of Top-40 radio in Montreal is the exception that proves the rule about the values underlying the rock news net: Usually, the rock articles are based on the idea that readers are primarily interested in stories coming from specific localities and organizations, and centred on a small number of specific topics.

Another news value Hartley refers to is "Meaningfulness".
Writes Hartley:

Cultural proximity: events that accord with the cultural background of the news-gatherers will be seen as more meaningful than others, and so more liable to be selected.

Hartley is mainly referring to the media bias against stories originating in non-Western cultures, and that certainly is relevant in rock criticism, where the focus is almost exclusively on Anglo-American rock artists. But the "meaningfulness" value manifests itself in other, more subtle ways in rock journalism. Firstly, editors and critics are more likely to cover types of music - mainstream, white rock, for example - that are familiar to them rather than musical forms - say hardcore punk or speed-metal or hardcore, street rap - that are regarded as foreign to their outlook. This value sometimes even cancels out the "threshold" value. Thus, large-scale heavy-metal shows often receive minor coverage in daily newspapers compared to club shows featuring artists in genres more appreciated by the journalists, even though the metal concerts often draw much larger crowds than most other genres of pop music.

The second principle in Hartley's discussion of the "meaningfulness" value is the idea of "Relevance". Writes

Hartley:

Events in far-off cultures, classes or regions will nevertheless become newsworthy if they impinge on the news-gatherer's 'home' culture - usually in the form of a threat.⁹

Continuing with the example of heavy metal, one often sees coverage of a heavy metal concert as an event that is potentially threatening to general society, and, frequently, the coverage will move from the entertainment pages of the newspaper to the news section when there are arrests outside the venue or other altercations with police or security personnel.

"Reference to elite persons" is another news value that Hartley mentions in his discussion of what receives coverage in the media, and this value is probably even more significant in entertainment writing than in news reporting. Rock journalism is certainly not immune to this bias, and the work of celebrity rock stars tends to receive a lot more critical attention from writers than the output of lesser-known rock artists. This leads to Hartley's next news value: "Personalization." Writes Hartley:

Events are seen as the actions of people as individuals. Individual people are easier to identify - and to identify with - than structures, forces or institutions.¹⁰

The tendency to personalize the story has always been the dominant approach in rock criticism, and the entire auteur style of rock criticism - which was the most significant outlook in 1970s rock criticism and continues to be a major force today - is based on the notion that rock music is the personal statement of individual rock artists. Structures (e.g. the record industry, national cultures), forces (e.g. the move toward global integration in all industries, the dominance of the United States in international culture), and institutions (e.g. the record labels, concert promoters, corporations interested in rock sponsorship, management firms) affect rock music in all kinds of vital ways, but none of these behind-the-scenes factors are brought up in most rock reviewing. The album or the concert is reviewed as if it is the product of a single artist. In general, it tends to be easier to write this sort of personalized rock criticism than it is to explain the forces behind the piece of rock music.

The constraints that are an integral part of news practices and organizational structures in newspapers have a major impact on the type of rock criticism that is generally

published in these papers. The rock criticism published in The Gazette in Montreal is a fairly representative example - in terms of both form and content - of daily newspaper rock criticism in North America, and an examination of the types of rock articles most frequently found in The Gazette reveals the pervasive influence of the constraints inherent in daily journalism.

One of the basic categories of rock newspaper writing is "the phoner": These are the articles based on a telephone interview with a rock performer, who is usually due to play in town sometime in the near-future. The musician is usually already on tour so it is therefore impossible to do an interview in person, and the rock critic often has a fairly short conversation with the rock performer because - usually - the record company has set up a series of phoners for the performer. Due to the fact that the musician may have to do as many as ten or fifteen telephone interviews in one day - and this is before having to go out and perform on stage - there is often a rather generic quality to these interviews, with the musician repeating very similar responses in all his or her interviews.

These "phoner" articles are also referred to as "advancers", in that they function as an advance preview of the rock act coming to town. Given the nature of the interview - short, not-too-personalized, highly supervised - and the structure of the article, these advancers tend to be uncritical biographical portraits of the artist, and this obviously suits the record companies and concert promoters just fine.

Gazette critic Mark Lepage's April 18, 1991 article, "Heavy-metal band Cinderella doesn't try to fit in", is a typical example of the kind of phoner piece that usually leads off Lepage's weekly "Rock Talk" column. The article is based on a phone interview with Tom Keifer, the lead singer and songwriter in American hard-rock band Cinderella. The short piece is mostly a thumbnail sketch of Cinderella's history, and, like most of these advancers, the focus is on the group's latest album (in this case, "Heartbreak Station", Cinderella's third album). More specifically, Lepage refers to the band's first single from the album, "Shelter Me", which he praises for attacking anti-rock crusaders like Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Centre:

'There's a lot of candy-ass music out there calling itself hard rock,' Keifer agrees from his hotel in Winnipeg. 'Our lyrics have always, I think, had a lot of attitude in that respect. Shelter Me is probably the most specific we've ever gotten. The whole point of the song is that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.'¹¹

In contrast to most advancers, this Cinderella article does actually have a point to make that has relevance beyond the group itself - mainly the idea that most rock bands don't complain about censorship, even though it is increasingly becoming a serious issue in the record biz. (This opinion - which is voiced by both Lepage and Keifer - is certainly open to debate. It would seem that many rock performers - especially rappers and heavy-metal acts - do spend a lot of time criticizing the censorship of music.) Lepage's doesn't go on to discuss this issue in any more detail after quoting Keifer; with the limited space available - the article is around 250-words long - Lepage only has enough space to talk about Cinderella's beginnings, and ends by gently mocking their less-than-heavy name. Writes Lepage:

Imagine the confusion of the 16-year-old male metalhead, looking for a tough patch to sew on to his jean jacket and realizing with adolescent acne angst that his favourite band is called....Cinderella.¹²

The article ends with the information about Cinderella's up-coming concert at the Forum, emphasizing that the story is a preview of an entertainment event. The advancer is the least critical of the various types of rock articles that appear regularly in daily newspapers.

One small step up from the phoner/advancer - in terms of depth and critical writing - is the profile based on an in-person interview with a rock artist. These types of rock articles tend to be a bit longer and more detailed than the phoner/advancers because the journalist can usually gather more material from a face-to-face interview with the musician. But these profiles are - by and large - still pretty close to straight promotion for the artist in question, and the whole exercise is just as controlled by the record company's promotional staff. In most cases, the rock artist is on a promotional tour and he or she will likely be doing several interviews-a-day in each city, and, so, like the phoners, the process can lead to the musician re-iterating the same, tired responses over-and-over again.

The Globe and Mail doesn't publish that many phoner/advancers because they don't have a regular, weekly rock column (the only regular, weekly rock-music feature in The Globe and Mail is the album review column by freelance writer Alan Niester - the Toronto-based newspaper does not have a full-time rock critic, which is a rather obvious indication of their opinion of the importance of rock music in their arts coverage). But The Globe and Mail does occasionally run profiles of rock performers who are passing through Toronto. When ex-Byrds leader Roger McGuinn was there to drum up interest in his most recent solo album, Back from Rio, Globe writer Kate Taylor wrote a profile of McGuinn, "Basking in the warmth". This feature profile reveals a more in-depth, somewhat-more analytic style of profile as compared to the shorter, more superficial phoner pieces. In the McGuinn profile, Taylor manages to examine the folk-rock roots of the Byrds, their forays into country music, and even has McGuinn comment on the Milli Vanilli scandal (in light of the fact that on the Byrds' first recording, Mr. Tambourine Man, McGuinn was the only member of the band allowed to play his instrument because producer Terry Melcher felt the other musicians were too inexperienced). Writes Taylor:

McGuinn believes the group [Milli Vanilli] was the scapegoat for an industry that had just taken technical manipulation one step too far. 'They were victimized by the whole thing....We looked at the Monkees as being like that and nobody ever said a word about that,' he says, recalling that the TV-show band did not play their own instruments.¹³

The form of rock article probably most frequently seen in daily newspapers is the concert review, and, by its nature, it tends to be a more critical type of story than the phoner/advancer or the in-person profile. The concert review is like the critical follow-up to the advancer; whereas the advance preview of the concert is almost necessarily a straight, uncritical promotional piece, the concert review gives the rock writer the forum to air his or her critical opinions on the act in question.

As mentioned earlier, concert reviews fulfil the news values of frequency and threshold, in that they take place within a finite time period - usually one night - and the concerts that are reviewed in newspapers are - in most cases - seen by a large enough number of people to assure the editors that the shows are worthy of coverage. A notable constraint that must be mentioned is the effect of

deadlines on concert reviewing in daily newspapers: Most editors prefer "same-night" reviews, meaning that the review will appear in the newspaper the day after the concert. That entails writing the review on deadline the night of the concert, and it is not unusual for the critic to have to leave the show before it's over to file the story. Often, the critic has from 30-minutes to one hour to write the story, which is usually around 300 words long. The deadline pressure forces the critics to rely on standard formulas to construct the reviews - hence the similarity of so many rock concert reviews in daily newspapers. At its worst - and most formulaic - the rock concert review consists of a "lead", which can take up as many as three or four paragraphs, some description of the concert (including mention of a few of the songs performed and a brief mention of the size and type of crowd), and some background (e.g. history, discography) of the performer.

The concert review does give the rock writer more of an opportunity to air his critical views, but the form can still limit the depth of the coverage. Concert reviews are

such a common feature in daily newspapers because they do fulfil the frequency and threshold criteria. Yet it is also a limited form.

Mark Lepage's review of the Pet Shop Boys' debut Montreal concert - "Pet Shop Boys camp out", in The Gazette April 16, 1991 - is an example of the limitations of the form. That is not imply that it is a badly constructed concert review - in fact it is a fairly average example of the genre. The problem lies in the form itself: The concert review just isn't the ideal medium to discuss the Pet Shop Boys' work. Firstly, the group is primarily a studio creation, and the vast majority of their work - and what they're best-known for - is not related to the live music experience. But, given the approach of a newspaper like The Gazette, the concert review is the place where their rock critic will examine the Pet Shop Boys because that's the most frequently published form of rock criticism in that newspaper.

"Ludicrous"¹⁴ is the first word - and the first sentence - of Lepage's review, and one is left with the impression

that The Gazette critic is not a big supporter of the Pet Shop Boys. But the review doesn't really reveal the critic's full feelings about the British pop group because the subject-matter is the show, not the entire Pet Shop Boys project.

Sometimes the critic will attempt to get around the limitations of the concert review by trying to transform the review into a more wide-ranging examination of the artist. In his review of a Toronto concert by Quebec pop singer Mitsou - "Mitsou needs her own style",¹⁵ in The Globe and Mail May 15, 1991 - Niester spends only two paragraphs of the six-paragraph review commenting on Mitsou's concert at the Opera House. The other four paragraphs - in other words, the majority of the article - discuss the Mitsou phenomenon, with references to her position as Quebec's answer to Madonna, the scandal over her rock video for the Dis-Moi, Dis-Moi song, and Niester makes a comparison between Mitsou and fellow Quebec star Céline Dion. (It should be noted that Niester was reviewing a Monday-night concert in the Wednesday edition of The Globe and Mail, and so he was not under the pressure of

having to file a review the night of the concert.)

But the relative lack of actual description of the concert in the Niester review begs the question: If the critic needs to devote most of the article to issues other than the concert itself to fully come to terms with the performer, then is it not fair to ask if the concert review is the ideal format to deal with the subject?

Album reviews are another common type of daily newspaper rock criticism, and many newspapers - including The Gazette and The Globe and Mail - have weekly album review columns. The album reviews tend to be shorter than concert reviews, and, usually, these album columns feature capsule-length reviews of several new albums. The record reviews in newspapers tend to be shorter and less in-depth than the reviews published in a magazine like Rolling Stone (though even Rolling Stone has shortened its reviews in recent years), and the daily newspaper reviews lean toward the consumer-guide approach to reviewing - i.e. the rock writer will strive to give the reader some notion of whether one should actually buy the album or not. Again, larger trends

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or on-going issues within rock music tend not to be discussed in these album reviews.

Niester's album reviews in The Globe and Mail tend to be pretty well straight-forward consumer guides, and there is little critical discussion beyond rating the albums in question. In his review of Paul McCartney's "Tripping the Live Fantastic", Niester ends with the sort of advice to the reader/potential-record-buyer that is typical of his album reviews. Writes Niester:

There are two reasons for wanting to own this. The double cassette (or double CD or triple album) package contains a rendition of every song played on the tour. And fully 18 of the numbers here are Beatle songs, many of them (Hey Jude, Let It Be) never performed live by the band.¹⁶

Niester doesn't attempt to situate the McCartney album and tour in a wider context - e.g. in the context of the growing rock nostalgia industry, as part of the on-going Beatles mythology - but, rather, the critic simply points out that the live album is worth buying. The Globe and Mail album reviews are a good example of the consumer-type reviewing stance: They are always short (never more than a couple of brief paragraphs) and to-the-point, and Niester

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inevitably concludes with his opinion on the merits of buying the disc.

Mark Lepage's album reviews in The Gazette are also relatively short, and he also tends to review several albums within each weekly album review column. But, on occasion - usually for major releases from respected or very popular rock artists - Lepage will write longer album reviews that examine the artist's work in more depth and within a broader framework. An example of this type of more in-depth album reviewing was Lepage's article on the two recent Guns N' Roses' albums, *Use Your Illusion I* and *Use Your Illusion II*. The Gazette critic used his entire column to discuss the new releases from the popular American hard-rock band - evidently because Guns N' Roses are of interest to a significant portion of the newspaper's readers (yet another example of the threshold principle at work). (It is worth noting, however, that Lepage's review appears on the second page of the Saturday Show section, and it is given lower priority in terms of placement than the wire-service reprint of New York Times critic Jon Pareles's review of the same albums, which appears on the "break page" or first

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page of the Show section of The Gazette that day.)

Most of Lepage's review is concerned with examining specific songs from the two Use Your Illusion albums, and, due to the larger amount of space available, Lepage is able to examine these songs in more detail than is normally the case in his album reviews (or in the usual Globe and Mail reviews). But the major difference between this longer review and his regular reviews is that Lepage makes an effort to situate the albums in the wider framework of rock history. Lepage - who is quite enthusiastic about the albums - argues that Guns N' Roses are bringing formerly alternative ideas and styles of music into the mainstream of American rock. Writes Lepage:

The last album fuelled by this kind of anger was Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols, released in 1977. That record defined punk, and was supposed to rip rock'n'roll out of the palace and throw it back into the streets. It took the Pistols 13 years to sell 500,000 copies. It took Guns N' Roses two hours. These two albums are making the charts and airwaves safe places for the kind of scattershot, epic fury and squint-eyed fear and loathing once associated with fringe music. 11

This is an example of a review that does address issues

that are larger and more wide-ranging than the album being critiqued, and it is important to note that this is not usually the case in the average, shorter, less, in-depth Gazette album reviews.

The rock criticism published in magazines like Rolling Stone and The Village Voice tends to be quite different from daily newspaper reviewing. Firstly, the reviews are almost always longer, and the greater amount of space allows the reviewers to examine the records in more detail. The magazine writers are also writing without many of the pressures - most notably deadline pressures - that face daily journalists. But the most significant difference between magazine rock critics and daily newspaper critics is the audience they're each writing for, and the relationship between the critic, the rock artist's audience, and the critic's audience is the subject of the following chapter.

ENDNOTES

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2. Understanding News, op. cit., p. 76.
3. Gaye Tuchman, Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 21.
4. Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality, op. cit., p. 21.
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7. Mark Lepage, "990 Oldies is no hit with young listeners", The Gazette, May 25, 1991, p. E5.
8. Understanding News, op. cit., p. 77.
9. Understanding News, op. cit., p. 77.
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11. Mark Lepage, "Heavy-metal band Cinderella doesn't try to fit in", The Gazette, April 18, 1991, p. D12.
12. "Heavy-metal band Cinderella doesn't try to fit in," op. cit., p. D12.
13. Kate Taylor, "Basking in the warmth," The Globe and Mail, February 12, 1991, p. A11.
14. Mark Lepage, "Pet Shop Boys camp out," The Gazette, April 16, 1991, p. B5.
15. Alan Niester, "Mitsou needs her own style", The Globe and Mail, May 15, 1991, p. A15.
16. Alan Niester, "Recordings of Note", The Globe and Mail, December 3, 1990, p. A15.

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17. Mark Lepage, "Use Your Illusion is so powerful it redefines the rock mainstream", The Gazette, September 21, 1991, p. E2.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE KIDS ARE STILL ALRIGHT: IDEAL COMMUNITIES AND ACTUAL AUDIENCES

Rock criticism has always been concerned with the interaction between the performer and the audience, and the complex relationship that links the artist and the fan has always been one of the primary sites of analysis for much rock writing. Assumptions about this relationship have been key to the development of most theories of rock, and one of the cornerstones of rock criticism is the notion that there is some sort of, often-loosely-defined, special rock community that is somehow different from the usual mass-media audience. The idea is that rock music - at the best of times - can create unique bonds between performer and fan, and that the resulting community of like-minded fans is what makes rock music - in theory, at least - different from, say, movies or television.

The idea that rock communities and the relationship between performer and listener are central to the power of rock

music was perhaps best articulated in Greil Marcus's
Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music.

Marcus posits the opinion that this interaction is at the heart of what great rock music is all about. Writes Marcus:

In the work of each performer there is an attempt to create oneself, to make a new man out of what is inherited and what is imagined; each individual attempt implies an ideal community, never easy to define, where that new man would be at home, where his work could communicate easily and deeply, where the members of that ideal community would speak as clearly to the artist as he does to them. The audiences that gather around rock'n'rollers are as close to that ideal community as anyone gets. The real drama of a performer's career comes when the ideal that one can hear in the music and the audience that the artist really attracts begin to affect each other. No artist can predict, let alone control, what an audience will make of his images; yet no rock'n'roller can exist without a relationship with an audience, whether it is the imaginary audience one begins with, or the all-too-real confusion of the audience one wins.¹

Marcus's description of this process - which he heralds as an example of democratic art in action - reflects the more optimistic viewpoint of rock critics in the mid-'70s. But Marcus is aware that there is often a large gap between the performer's ideal concept of community and his actual audience, and this contradiction keeps rearing its head throughout rock theory. This sense of unique rock'n'roll

communities developed during the 1960s, when the rock audience really was an identifiably different segment of society. During this era, the rock audience could be described as somehow different from the audiences for other forms of popular culture. Firstly, the rock audience was age-specific during this era - i.e. almost exclusively people under the age of 40 - and the rock musicians - and critics - of the era were explicit about their interest in attempting to construct a community - or series of communities - that would exist outside of the mainstream culture. It could be argued that, even then, this ideal community existed more in theory than in practice, but the important point here is that the concept of a unique rock community was a constant point of reference for critics, musicians, and fans in the 1960's.

But rock's sense of community was always fraught with contradictions. The music often sprung out of specific communities, but it seems almost inevitable that the artists lose those community roots and move further away from that community as they became more successful. As Marcus points out, the tensions in rock music are often the result of this contradiction, as the artist tries to

grapple with the issues raised by the distance between his ideal concept of community and the reality of his audience. The performer may still be singing about an ideal community but, as the artist becomes part of the rock industry, his contact with any real community tends to diminish. Dave Marsh discusses just such a contradiction in an essay on Detroit rock'n'roll revolutionaries the MC5, as he tries to explain the band's shift from being anarchic, White Panther, street-savvy radicals to acting more like just another rock'n'roll band. Writes Marsh:

The situation was not without parallel. The Five was only one of a number of bands that had grown up in the latter half of the sixties that related intensely to a specific hippie community: the Grateful Dead in San Francisco is only the most obvious example. As each of these groups moved out in the larger world and have come to terms (or failed to do so) with the record business, they've lost their grip on their community roots. The Dead, for instance, now have a larger audience in New York than they do in San Francisco. Others couldn't take the whiplash of perspective and, like Boston's Remains, broke up.²

Losing touch with one's community roots almost seems like a necessary by-product of any pop success story. But even as the rock performer finds himself detached from the community which originally helped start his career, the

concept of community continues to be a key touchstone in the work of many of these rock artists and in the critical writing surrounding their careers. The rock artists often attempt to make claims about their unique relationship to their fans by referring to their community ties, and the often unspoken notion is that their audience is more of a community of people with similar perspectives than the usual heterogeneous mass audience.

The conflict between the idealistic ideas about unique rock communities and the realities of the highly segregated mass audience for pop music has become even more pronounced in recent years, as the music audience continues to fragment at an increasingly fast rate. In his introduction to Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s, Village Voice critic Robert Christgau describes this fragmentation of audiences as one of the defining trends of the past decade. Writes Christgau:

The '80s were when '70s fragmentation became a way of life. The 'adult contemporary' market flashed its charge cards as the teen audience became more distinct than at any time since the Beatles. Even within a domestic market that count. for so much smaller a piece of the whole burrito, enormous new subsets arose, from rap's slouch-strutting B-boys to the affluently

spiritual ex-bohemians of new age. Tiny subsets got serviced, too - by hardcore crazies and lesbian singer-songwriters and disco recidivists and jazzbo eclectics and shit-rockers and Christians and a dozen varieties of messenger from the African diaspora. The metal and country audiences split at previously invisible seams; folk music came back.

Marsh makes a similar observation in The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made; "As we near the nineties, there is barely a sense of dialogue within genres, let alone among them."⁴

Simon Frith's argument in Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop that the rock era is over is - at least partly - based on the belief that the old rock-critic ideas about community don't make sense in the contemporary pop situation. Frith is making the case that the last few decades of popular music should be examined as part of a larger history of 20th century pop music rather than as part of an entirely separate history of rock music. Implicit in the argument is the idea that it is impossible to talk about the unique rock community as something separate from the general mass-media audience. For Frith, this point is closely connected to the changes within the pop music audience. Writes Frith:

I am now quite sure that the rock era is over. People will go on playing and enjoying rock music, of course (though the label is increasingly vague), but the music business is no longer organized around rock, around the selling of records of a particular sort of music event to young people. The rock era - born around 1956 with Elvis Presley, peaking around 1967 with Sgt Pepper, dying around 1976 with the Sex Pistols - turned out to be a by-way in the development of twentieth-century popular music, rather than, as we thought at the time, any kind of mass-cultural revolution. Rock was a last romantic attempt to preserve ways of music-making - performer as artist, performance as 'community' - that had been made obsolete by technology and capital....As I write, Rolling Stone magazine is celebrating its twentieth anniversary as though it had always meant to be what it has now become - a slick vehicle for delivering the middle-class, middle-aged leisure market to the USA's most conservative corporate advertisers.⁵

The changes at Rolling Stone are obviously closely linked to the changes in their perception of their audience. As Frith points out, the magazine now targets the very lucrative baby-boomer demographic, and the editorial focus of Rolling Stone is almost totally geared toward satisfying this demographically conceived audience. One sign of this focus on middle-aged readers is their obsession with the past, which is shown in the frequent special issues dedicated to the pop history of the 1960s, 1970s, and even the 1980s - it seems that anything is fair game for a special issue as long as it isn't contemporary. The

twentieth anniversary issue which Frith refers to is part of this trend at Rolling Stone, but there have also been issues devoted to "The '80s" (Nov. 15, 1990), "The Seventies" (Sept. 20, 1990), "The Sixties" (Aug. 23, 1990), and Rolling Stone has also done numerous histories of the best records of the past few decades. The text in "The 100 Greatest Albums of the '80s" feature - published Nov. 16, 1989 - reveals the middle-aged perspective of Rolling Stone, and their often-repeated view that rock history is always more interesting than the rock present.

For Rolling Stone, "This has been the first rock & roll decade without a revolution, or true revolutionaries, to call its own."⁶ Christgau, in his decade-end wrap-up feature in the Village Voice quite rightly asks why rap doesn't count as a revolution for the Rolling Stone editors, and one could make the same point vis-à-vis the emergence of world beat music and the increasing internationalization of pop. But the comment is representative of the magazine's traditionalist viewpoint, a point-of-view that is tailor-made for an audience of baby-boomer rock fans who grew up in the '60s. The fact

that the editors chose the Clash's "London Calling" as the No. 1 album of the '80s isn't without its own irony: Rolling Stone was far from an enthusiastic proponent of punk rock in the late-'70s/early-'80s (though several of their critics at the time - most notably Greil Marcus and Charles M. Young - were vocal supporters of punk, the overall tone of the magazine in the punk era was hardly pro-punk). But for Rolling Stone to make "London Calling" - the best-known album by British punk pioneers the Clash - the No. 1 album of the '80s in 1989 makes sense within the framework of their nostalgic approach. With critical hindsight, the magazine is able to incorporate more radical rock'n'roll - even though the music wouldn't have received prominent coverage at the time.

Many of the differences between Rolling Stone and Spin, which is Rolling Stone's main competitor in the North American rock magazine market now, can be traced to their different demographic audiences, and their perceptions of who their audience is. Spin is targeted at a younger, hipper readership than Rolling Stone, and it has much less of a attachment to re-examining rock history. Thus, instead

of an issue on, say, the sixties, Spin recently did a "New Music Preview '91" issue - published in Jan., 1991 - with Satanic hard-rocker Glenn Danzig on the cover, and the issue featured articles inside on Manhattan dance-club innovators Deee-Lite, smart Seattle hard rock band Alice in Chains, and alternative rockers Primus. (A new feature in Rolling Stone - called "New Faces" - is devoted to short pieces on the sort of somewhat-less-than-mainstream acts that regularly appear in - and receive prominent coverage in - the pages of Spin, and Rolling Stone's new section seems like an admittedly small-scale attempt to react to the competition.)

A good example of the very different editorial viewpoints at Spin and Rolling Stone is their reviews of '60s icons like Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. A comparison of their reviews of Dylan's "Oh Mercy" and the Rolling Stones' "Steel Wheels" reveals quite a bit about the two magazines' ideologies and perceptions of their target audiences.

Even the placement of the reviews gives one a good indication of the two magazines' very different positions

vis-à-vis these artists' work. Rolling Stone reviews both the Dylan and the Rolling Stones albums together in a feature article which is the lead piece in the album review section of the Sept. 21, 1989 issue of Rolling Stone.⁷ The review is accompanied by a half-page colour illustration of Rolling Stones singer Mick Jagger and guitarist Keith Richards, and Dylan, along with the usual photo of the album jackets. In contrast, Spin places the Dylan review second in its record review section in its October, 1989 issue, following a lead review of Tracy Chapman's "Crossroads" album, and the Rolling Stones only make it as the sixth review in the same issue (following reviews of Chapman, Dylan, Max Q, Chuckii Booker, Meat Puppets, and Soundgarden).⁸ Spin also accompanies the Dylan and Rolling Stones reviews with relatively small photos of the artists, and Rolling Stone devotes more space to the albums even though it is all within one review (27 inches of copy in Rolling Stone versus 19 inches for the two reviews combined in Spin).

Rolling Stone treats the return of the Rolling Stones and Dylan to critical form as an event of major proportions in

the rock world, as something of a revelation. It is as if the fact that Dylan and the Rolling Stones can release decent albums in 1989 is confirmation that all the other 1960's survivors - i.e. Rolling Stone's editors and writers, and, presumably, their target audience - can still be relevant too. There is a sense that the release of these albums signals much more than simply that the careers of Dylan and the Rolling Stones are back on track. Writes Rolling Stone reviewer Anthony DeCurtis:

Now, in the summer of love of the past, the Stones and Dylan have weighed in with albums that signal renewed conviction and reactivated sense of purpose....Deep-sixing nostalgia, the Stones and Dylan have made vital albums of, for and about their time.

In the conclusion of his review, DeCurtis makes explicit his view that perhaps the central drama of these artists' careers is their often-difficult relationship with their audience, and that the demands from their audiences is the cause of much of the conflict in their work. The discussion is based on the idea that rock artists like Dylan and the Rolling Stones do construct these special relationships with audiences, and that this sense of commitment to a rock community is quite different from the experiences in other mass-media forms of popular culture. Writes DeCurtis:

Seemingly about a former lover, "What Was It You Wanted" sets forth a series of chiding questions about expectations - expectations that the singer has failed to meet, implicitly because of their unreasonable nature. They are the sort of questions Dylan has been raising in songs as long ago as "It Ain't Me Babe."....Never one to pander to his audience, Dylan has often gone to the other extreme, eluding his listeners' desires in a manner that has bordered on the perverse. The Rolling Stones, too, carry the burden of their own history; the question of how a rock & roll band can carry its music into adulthood is part of the struggle that nearly broke the band up. But fans have a right to their desires, too, and frequently an artist's defensiveness about the narrowness of audience taste is really a response to work even the artist fears is second-rate. The best defense of exacting audience demands is the straightforward fact these great expectations derive from the artist's own work. Another is that those demands are sometimes met by work that is both challenging and satisfying - as these splendid new albums prove.¹⁰

DeCurtis's point about the central importance of these artists' interaction with their audience and the artists' conception of their place in the rock'n'roll community echoes the spirit of much of the critical rock writing about audience. From Marcus's Mystery Train to late '80s Rolling Stone, discussion of the relationship between performer and audience is a core principle in rock reviewing. In DeCurtis's analysis of the Rolling Stones and Dylan, the implicit idea is that their connections with

their audience is somehow more personalized and less exclusively commercial than is the case in other media forms (or even in other examples of rock music). But DeCurtis isn't thinking about some abstract notion of audience; it is clear from the review that he is speaking for and about the '60s generation that has been following the careers of Dylan and the Rolling Stones for the past 30 years. Here is where the artists' ideas about audience intersect with the magazine's - and the critic's - concept of their audience. In this case, the two views of audience - and community - are quite similar. Both are targeting the same demographic.

This is not the case with Spin, which takes a much different stance toward '60s veterans like the Rolling Stones and Dylan. In short, their reviewers make much less of a big deal about Dylan and the Rolling Stones' return to critical form, and the Spin reviewers take a much less reverential tone when writing about these rock stars. Spin writer Joe Levy doesn't hesitate to make fun of Dylan in his review of "Oh Mercy" and he openly mocks Dylan's rather erratic production in recent years. Writes Levy:

Dylan has spent most of this decade playing the clown (even calling one of his best songs of the last 10 years "Jokerman"), so the very fact that this record is any good at all will surprise people.¹¹

Levy also mocks Dylan's position as the veteran rock hero: "...on the weakest songs....Dylan is simply the elder statesman in the studio with a good producer."¹² Later Levy jokes: "Makes you long for the inevitable Dylan greatest hits, Sucking in the 80s."¹³ In the end, Spin comes to the same conclusion as Rolling Stone: That "Oh Mercy" is Dylan's best album in a long while, but the assumption articulated in the Rolling Stone review that this is a major cultural event is not shared by the Spin reviewer. The different perspectives on Dylan are directly related to the different target audiences of the two magazines. Spin is much more concerned with the young, hip rock fan (who may, in fact, buy the latest Dylan album, but likely won't be someone who has followed Dylan's career for the past 25 years).

The same irreverent attitude toward the old rock veterans is displayed in Karen Schoemer's review of the Rolling Stones' "Steel Wheels" album in the same issue of Spin.

Writes Schoemer:

At the close of the 80s, the Stones remain a damn fine band, consistently ready with riffs and rock'n'roll inspiration when their peers - the Who, the Kinks, the Beatles - have petered out.¹⁴

Her description of the Rolling Stones as "a damn fine band" is a deliberate softening of the typical Rolling Stone claim that the Stones are the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world. Schoemer's review is generally favourable, and she goes on categorize "Steel Wheels" as one of the best Stones records since the early '70s. Writes Schoemer:

Like "Some Girls", it's a benchmark that looks as much towards the Stones' future as their past, lacking the danger of "Exile" and "Sticky Fingers" but more solid and hungry than anything they've done this decade.¹⁵

The Spin review rejects the institutionalized nostalgia that is at the foundation of the Rolling Stone review of "Steel Wheels" and "Oh Mercy", but Spin's does share Rolling Stone's belief that somehow the rock'n'roll past - as exemplified by albums like "Exile" and "Sticky Fingers" - produced music that was more exciting and more authentic than today's rock.

These same concerns about ideal communities and their

relationship with rock artists frequently pop up in daily newspaper rock criticism as well. Gazette critic John Griffin's article on the Rolling Stones concert at the Olympic Stadium - published in The Gazette Dec. 14, 1989 - is less a review of the show than a meditation on the changing relationship between rock fans who grew up in the '60s with the Stones and the band itself. Griffin's lead is: "Whatever the Stones are about in 1989, it's not only rock'n'roll."¹⁶ For Griffin, who is writing from the perspective of a thirtysomething critic who has been following the Rolling Stones' career for the past couple of decades, the more mainstream, more commercial, less dangerous 1989 version of the Rolling Stones is a sign that the popular culture has changed radically since the '60s, and Griffin argues that the band has changed along with their old audience. Griffin describes the audience in the following terms: "A generation weaned on the British band back in the '60s and long since sucked in by business had decided to relive a few memories, recapture some youth."¹⁷

Like the Rolling Stone critic, Griffin is making explicit the connection between the Rolling Stones' music and the

baby-boomer generation's changing attitudes. But, unlike Rolling Stone, Griffin is less interested in praising the nostalgic aspects of this relationship. Writes Griffin:

They were occasional reminders of what's gone missing in this tour, what's missing with the Stones now, and what's really missing in all of us. Those days are over. We live them in memories; in flashes of songs like the "Ruby Tuesday" that ignited the painfully well-behaved crowd last night; and in the spectacles that rock has become in the corporate age."

Griffin is bemoaning the commercialization of rock, and the disappearance of the counterculture, and, in that sense, his piece stands in stark contrast to the Rolling Stone review of the Rolling Stones. But, at the core of Griffin's point-of-view, is the same notion that the connection between the performer and the audience is the most important aspect of rock music, and that these sorts of connections are central to the power of rock.

Assumptions about audiences - real or ideal - are lurking in the shadows of most newspaper concert reviews, and the usually-unwritten philosophy is that the links between the performer and the audience should be the focus of discussion in the review. A common rock-critic assumption

is that the more direct the connection between audience and artist, the more satisfying the show is on a critical level. Writes Griffin: "But gargantuan tours like this one steal all the immediacy and intimacy from the show, and from our reveries."¹⁹ The assumption - which is based on notions about the authenticity of certain types of rock - is that the best concerts are the smaller-scale, more intimate affairs. The idea is that it is essential for the audience to interact on a direct, emotional level with the artist at a concert, and this sort of relationship isn't likely to develop in a stadium.

The rock critic ends up having to make assumptions about the audience at the rock shows, and, in a way, this unscientific procedure echoes the process that the rock artist goes through. The successful rock artist has to make assumptions about his or her audience, and, often enough, will talk - and sing - about idealized notions of his community of followers. One only has to think of a band like the Rolling Stones' attempt to maintain street credibility by singing about a community which is very far

removed from their own rock-star lifestyles. The rock critic routinely articulates generalizations about the concert audiences, and the audience's role - e.g. their reaction, their expectations - often plays a significant part in a newspaper concert review.

For example, in his review of the Rolling Stones show, John Griffin assumes that the audience comes from the "generation weaned on the British band back in the '60s". But that was only one segment of the crowd at the Olympic Stadium Rolling Stones shows: There were also many much-younger rock fans who weren't even alive when the Rolling Stones first became popular. But these assumptions are often a central part of the newspaper concert review. For example, in a review of a Motown "oldies" double bill pairing the Temptations and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, Gazette critic Mark Lepage builds his review around the idea that this was a nostalgic evening for the baby-boomer audience. Writes Lepage:

It is comforting to note that in this dark year 1991, a few trumpeted notes of My Girl can still send a crowd of 2,000 otherwise sane adults into teeny-bopper paroxysms.²⁰

Even the headline for the review underlines the assumptions about the audience: "Temps part Motown mists for 40-something faithful."²¹

In this case, Lepage's assumptions about the audience for the Temptations and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas probably aren't far off the mark: This is a classic-rock, nostalgic bill targeted almost exclusively at the boomer demographic. But an interesting dilemma arises when the critic is reviewing a concert targeted at a much younger audience. Suddenly, it becomes harder to make those same assumptions about the audience and their relationship to the performer. It is a touchy area for the rock critics. The newspaper editors aren't keen on the critic giving his or her honest opinion about pre-teen acts like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles - who actually toured as a rock band - and Vanilla Ice because the editors don't want to alienate the young readers. (In times of diminishing audiences for many daily newspapers, it becomes increasingly important to try to develop a young audience who will help guarantee the

newspaper's future viability.)

The Gazette has become increasingly concerned about the need to develop a young audience in the past couple of years, and the clearest example of this concern can be seen in their use of "teen critics." The editors fear that their regular rock and movie critics are out-of-touch with teenagers, and so the newspaper came up with the idea of assigning teens to review records, videos, and movies. The Sunday edition of The Gazette now features the "Express" pages which are exclusively written by and for teenagers, and these high-school and CEGEP students review albums in a down-to-earth style that tends to be less critical and informed than the regular rock critics' writing. The idea presumably is that young readers will be able to relate to these teen critics' reviews more easily than to an older rock critics' reviews. The only problem is that these teen reviews often assume that the reader has no knowledge of the bands being discussed, and even less knowledge of rock history. For example, teen reviewer Adam Herscu starts off a review of veteran British rock band The Jesus and Mary Chain's "Honey's Dead" by proclaiming: "More typical

alternative, Robert Smith [leader of the Cure] imitations, yet better than the usual groups."²² The comment reveals that the critic isn't aware that the Jesus and Mary Chain have a long history that rivals the Cure's, but the concept of the teen rock critics is based on the notion that these young readers aren't looking for specialized, informed discussion of rock.

Lepage's review of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles at the Forum - "Turtle power lights up the Forum" in The Gazette Friday, May 3, 1991 - reveals how the regular rock critic has to walk a critical tightrope when reviewing an act that appeals exclusively to a young audience. The review contains almost no critical commentary about the performance itself. It is more concerned with giving a description of the show and the very-young audience (Lepage estimates that most of the fans are between the ages of three and 12). There is more space devoted to describing the merchandise than anything else, and Lepage includes several quotes from kids and their parents at the concert. One has the impression that Lepage doesn't fully approve of the Ninja Turtles phenomenon, but he never comes right out

and states his critical opinion. Writes Lepage:

Over the PA, before the Turtles actually took the stage, Don Henley was singing The End of the Innocence. A kid walked by with \$40 worth of paraphernalia. No kidding.¹³

But that's as close as Lepage comes to criticizing the concert. There are fewer suppositions made about the audience than in a regular concert review because there's a generation gap between the critic and the audience in this case. If anything, the pre-teen audience at a concert like this is considered to be something of a betrayal of the rock'n'roll community that is supposed to exist - at least in the ideal - at a rock concert. The audience at a Ninja Turtle show - as Lepage points out - is closer to the standard mainstream, mass audience for other entertainment forms, and, therefore, the usual critical assumptions about audience and performer - the special links, demands etc. - don't apply in this case.

Usually, these assumptions about the audience and its relationship to the performer are not made explicit within the review. The assumptions will colour the critic's

perspective on the concert, but the writer will not necessarily articulate his ideas and presumptions about the crowd. But New York Times critic Jon Pareles makes the rock-critic suppositions about audience explicit in a think piece on audience, community, and rock concerts, and he discusses the potential for a rock audience to be transformed into some sort of idealized community - at least temporarily. Pareles describes concerts - at their best - as:

....the kind of musical experience that no recording can duplicate - the feeling that everyone in the room, offstage and on, has become one big, happy, rhythm-driven community. Music, especially dance music, still has that power - not just because a good beat can be irresistible, but because concertgoing preserves elements of ritual that are fast disappearing elsewhere.²⁴

Pareles contrasts the rock-concert experience with other forms of contemporary mass entertainment consumption, and he notes that this potential for personal interaction at rock shows is highly unusual in this era of home entertainment and fragmented, heterogeneous audiences.

Writes Pareles:

But in an age of secularization, assimilation and atomization, there seems to be an increased longing for a sense of community. In a competitive, individualistic culture, that's our paradise lost.²⁵

The irony is that rock music, in many ways, is a perfect example of a mass media form of culture that has very little to do with any traditional sense of community. Pareles's notions about the rock community - like most rock critic's ideas about community - are based on the idea that the ideal community is created at the live concert. But most pop music is consumed in setting other than the live one: In stores, at home, in discotheques, on movie soundtracks. By the 1980's, a large segment of the pop world - most notably the dance-pop acts - were touring a lot less because video was considered to be a more effective promotional tool. Yet the idea that the rock audience is more of a community than, say, the movie audience continues to be a cornerstone of much rock criticism; and the rock artists who're given the most praise tend to be the ones that are seen as having the ability to further this sense of community.

Similar discussions of the links between rock artists and their audiences have come up in academic writing about popular music, and, like Pareles, many pop theorists feel

that an examination of the connections between audience and performer must be a key component in any analysis of the power of rock music. In his essay on the politics of the popular in the Reagan era, "Rockin' with Reagan or The Mainstreaming of postmodernity, or Who is 'The Boss' anyway?", Lawrence Grossberg uses the relationship between Bruce Springsteen and his audience as an example of the potential that rock music has for forging links between performer and fan that go beyond the usual mass-media experience. Grossberg examines how a performer like Springsteen can make an impact on a heterogeneous crowd, and he describes the audience as existing "for a while in a 'simulacrum' of community in an alienating space."¹⁶ Grossberg is attempting to give a more optimistic reading of the contemporary rock audience than the one offered by the post-modern theorists, and a central tenet of his argument is that a rock artist like Springsteen can create a unique community experience at his concerts, and, from this comes the potential for empowerment through his music. Writes Grossberg:

But he [Springsteen] does offer something, a glimpse outside, a bit of compensation for their affective terror and emptiness: namely, himself and his performance. For what is obvious, over and over in his performances, is that Springsteen cares about rock and roll and its audiences. In a certain sense, perhaps with an unavoidable touch of romanticism, his audience responds to the fact that Bruce has not broken his promise - albeit a small one in the context of global struggles.²⁷

Grossberg's argument about the relationship between rock performer and rock audience doesn't take for granted the assumptions about audience that are so central to newspaper and magazine rock criticism. His discussion of Springsteen's effect on his audience attempts to examine those ideas about audience that are never questioned by the rock critics. But Grossberg's point about Springsteen does echo rock critic Greil Marcus's argument about the relationship between audience and artist in Mystery Train, and both these theorists are articulating concerns that are raised in a less explicit way in much rock criticism. Rock music is rarely - if ever - analyzed in a social vacuum, and the audience's reaction - real and imagined - is always a part of any serious rock criticism. Given the primary importance of the audience in so much rock writing, it is

ironic that so little space in rock journalism and rock theory is devoted to thorough analysis - empirical or otherwise - of the rock audience. Usually, the assumptions are never investigated, just postulated. But those presumptions about rock music's relationship to its audience are central to most arguments about the power of rock to make an impact that is on a different level than other forms of culture.

From Robert Christgau's Village Voice essays in the 1960s to Mark Lepage's reviews in The Gazette in the 1990s, ideas about audience have always been central to rock criticism, and these often-unwritten principles about audience have coloured the overall tone of rock criticism. In spite of the fact that rock has entered the mainstream of the popular culture in so many ways over the past 25 years, the rock critics still cling to the notion that rock can still be - at its best - a uniquely populist and potentially radical art form as a result of the complex relationships established between the performer and the fans. Thus, concert and album reviews almost always discuss the artist's work in terms of its effect on the audience, and, in its most basic form, the unspoken idea is

that the more direct the impact, the more positive the concert experience. The irony is that - at this stage of rock history - much of the consumption of rock music is in forms - like rock video, rock-flavoured commercials, rock movie soundtracks - that is anything but direct performer-to-fan interaction. The rock critics' belief in the distinctiveness of this performer-fan relationship can be traced back to the critics' uneasiness with his or her role as a cog in the pop-business marketing machinery: The critic is profoundly ambivalent about this aspect of the profession. The issues that arise out of this gap between the critics' idealistic notions about audience and the reality of the rock market today have been discussed within academic rock theory, and it used to be that these issues were rarely if ever explicitly examined within rock criticism itself. But the debates in theoretical circles are starting to affect rock criticism, if only in an indirect fashion, and the concluding chapter looks at how contemporary rock criticism is dealing with this theoretical crisis.

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CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: NEVER MIND THE CRITICS, HERE'S THE THEORY

Nirvana was the rock story of 1991. In a way, it was a classic, almost clichéd slice of rock mythology-in-the-making. Their success story was a variation on the usual rock-press narrative about the small band that comes out of nowhere and - in short order - tops the charts, and, certainly, that was the way a lot of the media covered the event. It made it into the business section of the New York Times and Rolling Stone also did it as a business story - in the issue of Feb. 20, 1992 - with the cover headline, "Nirvana Rocks the Charts." For Rolling Stone, the angle was the astonishing fact - at least for their journalists - that Nirvana's "Nevermind" bumped Michael Jackson's "Dangerous" out of the top spot on the album charts.¹

On one level, the success of Nirvana was simply the most striking rock business story of the year. At the start of

1991, the Seattle band was largely unknown outside of the independent (indie), alternative rock scene, and they made the transition from that not-even-cult-status to the top of the Billboard charts in a remarkably short span of time. Most importantly, the band made that leap without substantially weakening or watering down their aggressive, unabashedly punk approach.

But, on another level, the Nirvana story reveals a fair bit about the state of critical rock writing. On first view, the success of Nirvana seems like the revenge of the punk theorists. Over a decade after the North American rock critics began championing punk rock as the salvation of rock'n'roll, the genre finally produced its first genuine American success story in Nirvana. 14 years after the release of the groundbreaking "Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols" - the British punk band's first and only studio album, and generally considered to be the quintessential punk statement - Nirvana's "Nevermind" album made it to the No. 1 position on Billboard Magazine's "Top 200" album chart, and, at the time of writing, it has sold over two million copies in the United States. "Nevermind"

is an uncompromisingly tough punk record, and it is exploding with the disaffection and rage that was an integral part of the original wave of punk music. ("Nevermind" is, however, also a very melodic variant of punk rock, and there's no doubt that the Seattle band's way with a tune didn't hamper their rapid ascent up the pop charts.)

Since the arrival of the first Sex Pistols singles, there had been critics predicting the imminent take-over of the U.S. charts by the new wave of punk artists. But that kind of commercial success never materialized on this side of the Atlantic. Dave Laing argues that punk's commercial impact wasn't even that great in Britain. Laing writes, in One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock:

Punk rock, then, had failed to emulate the kind of commercial success of that earlier Next Big Thing [the Beatles-led British rock boom of the early 1960s], and consequently its stylistic impact on the musical mainstream was a limited one.²

But the critical ground has shifted substantially since the initial punk movement, and, by 1991, rock critics were no longer arguing from the same us-versus-them perspective of the punk-influenced critics of the late-1970s. Everyone was talking about the fragmented rock market, and "alternative

rock" - the rather loosely-defined descendent of punk - was considered to be just one of the many fragmented categories vying for space in the rock world. For the critics - like Robert Christgau, who wrote that "The '80s were when '70s fragmentation became a way of life"³ - that segmented, heterogenous market was one of the major developments in rock over the past decade.

The optimistic populism of the punk theorists - which, in turn, echoed the optimistic populism of the original '60s rock criticism - was long gone by the end of the '80s. If Nirvana's success had happened ten years earlier, it might have been construed as the revenge of the punk-influenced critics. But, in 1991, most of the critics were as surprised as everyone else in the rock business by Nirvana's success, and the rock media spent the last few months of 1991 playing frantic critical catch-up.

The critical "think pieces" only began appearing after Nirvana made it to the top of the charts, as the critics rushed to explain - with hindsight - the Nirvana phenomenon. In the New York Times, Simon Reynolds celebrated "Nevermind" as an example of "untamed punk rock" breaking into the Top 10. Writes Reynolds:

It's not so much the album's glossy grunge that's made it such a success, however, but the raw, raging fashion with which Nirvana articulates its feelings of impotence, bewilderment and inertia. Like other classic punk albums - the Stooges' "Funhouse", the Sex Pistols' "Never Mind the Bollocks", Black Flag's "Damaged" - it captures the particular desperation of its day, while having a handle on the perennial teen-age obsessions with boredom, claustrophobia and sex.⁴

Uncharacteristically, the New York Times ran a second feature piece on Nirvana a couple of months later, and, in it, Karen Schoemer, situated the case of Nirvana within the more general framework of the ever-more intense competition at the top of the pop charts. Writes Schoemer:

Nirvana's appeal may still be a mystery to mainstream record buyers. But its success is only one indication of a power struggle going on at the top of the charts. The country singer Garth Brooks, the hard-core rappers N.W.A. and Ice Cube and the heavy-metal band Metallica have each monopolized top album spots. Like Nirvana - and unlike such previous crossovers as Hammer or Warrant - none of these artists made significant musical concessions to the mainstream.⁵

This fragmentation of the pop audience - or, put another way, the disappearance of the homogenous mainstream - calls into question many of the traditional tenets of rock criticism, including the classic critical assumptions about the unique rock community. In a pop universe that embraces

a middle-of-the-road country singer like Garth Brooks and an angry punk-rock outfit like Nirvana, one has to begin looking at the audience as a series of often-unconnected communities rather than as any kind of connected whole.

This new landscape has led to the disappearance of the sort of wide-eyed optimistic readings of pop culture that were the norm from the '60s right up to the heady punk days of the late '70s. Take, for example, Lester Bangs's well-known New Musical Express feature on The Clash back in 1977: The idealistic discussion of punk rock's potential is typical of the hip, critical response to punk at the time, and it is the sort of optimistic outlook that has all but disappeared from contemporary rock criticism. In 1977, Bangs could argue that:

....Here at last is a band which not only preaches something good but practices it as well, that instead of talking about changes in social behaviour puts the model of a truly egalitarian society into practice in their own conduct....shows how far they're going towards the realization of all the hopes we ever had about rock'n'roll as utopian dream - because if rock'n'roll is truly the democratic artform, then the democracy has got to begin at home; that is, the everlasting and totally disgusting walls between artists and audience must come down, elitism must perish, the "stars" have got to be humanized, demythologized, and the audience has got to be treated with more respect.

And Bangs concludes the essay with nothing less than a very-'60s-like argument about the power of rock music and rock musicians to transform society. Writes Bangs:

.....Even if we don't need any more leaders, we could do with a lot more models. If that's what the punks really amount to, then perhaps we actually do have the germ of a new society, or at least a new sensibility, that cuts through things like class and race and sex.

This optimistic populism had its last hurrah in the rock criticism that appeared during the early years of the punk wave, and it is clearly similar in spirit and outlook to the classic countercultural perspective that can be found in the '60s writings of a critic like Robert Christgau. Rock has moved so much closer to the cultural mainstream since then, and the role of the critic has changed along the way. Critical writing has also become more a part of the mainstream culture, and rock criticism - at least on one level - has to be regarded as part of the commercial marketing surrounding any rock artist.

In the past few years, one can see that the rock critics are still trying to make sense of the art form using the remnants of those countercultural critical tools, even if

they realize that it is becoming harder and harder to make the argument for rock's special status in the cultural field. One of the developments related to this critical crisis of faith is that the rock critics have - for the first time - begun to borrow some ideas from the academic discussion of pop music, at the same time that that same academic debate has started to generate more interest.

For example, rock critics have started to make mention of a term like "postmodernism" in their reviews, though they seldom stop to give anything approaching a definition of the term, and it has been argued - by Andrew Goodwin, among others - that the theoretical use of a postmodern perspective to analyze rock music is, in fact, a result of the failure of countercultural theories to properly explain contemporary pop music. Writes Goodwin, in a critique of postmodern theorist E. Ann Kaplan's work:

These shifts towards a postmodern culture can be explained in sociological and demographic terms, as the break-up of counter-cultural formations, which leave today's youth and their adult counter-cultural defectors in a position that academic commentators find difficult to explain, precisely because they are locked into counter-cultural assumptions that no longer apply.

Kaplan's book-length examination of music video, in general, and MTV, in particular - Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, & Consumer Culture - is an example of a postmodern analysis of the contemporary pop music culture that is actually based on the countercultural perspective of '60s rock criticism. Kaplan even admits that her writing is grounded in a 1960's countercultural framework and that she has lost touch with popular music over the past 20 years. Writes Kaplan:

In the 1960s I was part of the politicized youth culture, although we all kept up with the Hippies, the Flower Children, and the rock and roll culture, especially as represented by the Beatles, the Stones, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin. But in the 1970s I dropped out to become an adult, only vaguely keeping track of punk, new wave and heavy metal - largely through my daughter.'

Kaplan's argument that contemporary rock music is an example of a postmodern art form is based - at least in part - on her view that today's music is not as vital as it was in her youth. Writes Kaplan:

.....trends set in motion originally by black musicians have possibly gone as far as they can, as is arguably the case with modern art developments. Part of what we call the postmodern is precisely this phase of a movement that seems to have reached the end of its line.¹⁰

Kaplan's pessimism about rock culture is a result of the fact that her perspective is thoroughly grounded in dated, '60s ideas about music and (counter)culture. Kaplan goes on to describe rock videos as postmodern because MTV:

Reproduces a kind of decenteredness, often called 'postmodernist,' that increasingly reflects young people's condition in the advanced stage of highly developed, technological capitalism evident in America....MTV arguably addresses the desires, fantasies, and anxieties of young people growing up in a world in which all traditional categories are being blurred and all institutions questioned - a characteristic of postmodernism."

For Kaplan, rock video also should be considered postmodernist for a host of reasons related to the art form itself: That videos erase the linear approach to cultural history, blurring the lines between past and present, that the form posits a decentred audience, and, finally, that rock videos deconstruct the various forms of narrative film culture.

Lawrence Grossberg also tries to come to grips with rock with an approach that borrows liberally from the concepts and language surrounding the postmodern debate. Like Kaplan

- and like most critics and theorists writing about rock today - Grossberg realizes that the countercultural optimism that runs through so much of early rock theory and criticism is no longer appropriate in the current pop climate. But Grossberg differs radically from Kaplan in the sense that he rejects the general pessimism about youth culture that one finds in Kaplan's writing (and, one should add, in so much conservative writing about rock culture). Grossberg's postmodern analysis takes for granted that the audience is much more active and intelligent than is the case in Kaplan's argument.

In the essay, "Rockin' with Reagan or The Mainstreaming of postmodernity, or Who is 'the Boss' anyway," Grossberg writes: "We must still avoid falling back into an approach which fails to take the activity and context of the audience into account."¹² For Grossberg, there is an active, interactive relationship between audience and performer. Grossberg talks about "affective structures" articulated by rock performers like Bruce Springsteen, and this notion is an attempt to make claims for the power of rock music within the framework of an analysis that takes as a given that the authenticity of rock is a questionable

concept at this point in rock history. According to Grossberg, what's important is the affective bonds forged between performer and fan, and the contradictions raised by this affective link. In an essay on music video, "Music Television: Swinging on the (Postmodern) Star," Grossberg writes:

Rock and roll empowers its fans by placing them into a particular 'affective alliance' which marks their difference, not in terms of their beliefs and values as much as their ability to struggle against the dominant moods of contemporary life without being able to rely on its languages.¹³

What sets Grossberg's analysis apart from the rock critics' championing of rock'n'roll is the fact that Grossberg doesn't confine his examination to the rock culture. He discusses this relationship between culture and fan within the context of the broader popular culture, encompassing everything from television to movies to music, and, unlike the rock critics, Grossberg explicitly states that there is a critical crisis here. Writes Grossberg: "Postmodernity, then, points to a crisis in our ability to locate any meaning as a possible and appropriate source for an impassioned commitment."¹⁴

The rock critics writing in newspapers and magazines do not usually explicitly discuss these sorts of issues. But many of the critics are aware that there is a theoretical dilemma in rock criticism: The critics do still want to believe in something, but they find it difficult to justify this sort of idealism in today's rock world. The sweeping changes in the music and in the music industry over the past couple of decades have called into question many of the fundamental assumptions of the early, countercultural rock theory. The loss of a sense of a special rock community, the fragmentation of the rock audience, the internationalization of pop, the increasing proliferation of market-driven cross-promotions between rock, movies, and music television, the debunking of the cult of authenticity, the gradual homogenization of rock radio, the failure of punk to make any significant commercial impact in North America - all these factors have led rock critics to the conclusion that the optimistic, often-radical populism of the past is no longer applicable in the current rock climate.

To return to the example of Nirvana, it came as no real

surprise to most observers to learn that the Seattle rockers had swept the Village Voice's 18th (or 19th) annual Pazz & Jop Critics' Poll in the spring of 1992, and the 300 voting critics named Nirvana's "Nevermind" album as the top album of the year, and "Smells Like Teen Spirit" as the single and video of the year. Nirvana are a critics' band, and their celebration of punk values like teen angst, adolescent rebellion, and noise-for-noise's-sake fit into many critics' paradigms of what great rock'n'roll was supposed to be all about.

But what was more surprising was Robert Christgau's dire, downbeat interpretation of the Pazz & Jop results. The Village Voice's Christgau begins his survey of the 1991 rock and pop landscape by admitting that he only really began taking Nirvana seriously after they bounced Michael Jackson out of the top Billboard position at Christmas, and he argues that Nirvana's sweep of the critics' poll is something less than a rock revolution in this fragmented rock world. Christgau talks about all the savvy marketing support that Nirvana received from Geffen - their record label - and he situates the band as the most successful example - critically and commercially - of the American

indie scene of the past decade. But he seems dismayed by the fact that the band doesn't make anything approaching an explicit political statement on "Nevermind", that "Smells like Teen Spirit" is almost defeatist. Writes Christgau:

In short, the most suggestive musicians of the year were escapist and proud - with some reason, they hate the reality that used to be a friend of theirs, and they're coping with a visionary audacity that signifies. Personally, I think Nevermind is more fun and possibly more realistic than Loveless if not Of the Heart, of the Soul and of the Cross, and when art is no fun anymore I'm getting out. But the dubious equation of loud/fast/smart with tough-minded activism/realism - a casual (and ultimately insupportable) assumption that shores up a lot of Amerindie's (and my) musical pleasure - is absurd on the face of it in this year of dazed here-we-are-now-entertain-us.¹³

For Christgau, the lack of activist politics in Nirvana's music - and, by extension, in most of the American indie-rock scene - is one of the reasons that he refuses to build up much genuine enthusiasm in his year-end review, and this essay is clearly written from a point-of-view still steeped in the '60s-rock-critic perspective that examines rock within the framework of a countercultural/populist perspective. By these standards, Christgau feels that Nirvana's success is not cause for any great celebration, and he attempts to emphasize the idea that the Nirvana success story cannot be divorced from the commercial

realities of the '90s rock business. Writes Christgau:

Commercial still means something like popular, and indie insularity is the rock equivalent of left sectarianism, but if I have to choose between people who are in it for the money and people who are in it for love (or righteousness, or pride, or even vanity), I know where I'll stand. The only hope I'll permit myself in this bleak season is that it never comes down to that.¹⁶

This sort of pessimistic interpretation of contemporary rock culture makes perfect sense if one is trying to understand that culture from the perspective of the rock criticism forged in the '60s and perfected in the '70s. What is less predictable is the fact that - in spite of the fragmentation, the commercialization, the constraints of media practice, etc - critics still manage to make arguments about the power of rock music as a cultural force that is more potent and relevant than other entertainment forms. From Grossberg's notions about the "affective alliances" created by a great rock performance to Jon Savage's discussion of the Sex Pistols in England's Dreaming, there still are many examples of critical writing that takes those original rock-critic principles and transform them into something that can try to make sense of today's music without resorting to tired cynicism. Take,

for example, Savage's comparison of the Sex Pistols and Nirvana in the recent issue of Spin devoted to the greatest bands of all time. Writes Savage:

It takes only one record, by the right group with the right haircut, the right attitude, the right song, and the right moral authority, and the world is changed.....You all know about this season's pop phenom. As Nirvana smashes its way through the U.S. and Europe, howling songs of pain and rebellion, it is single-handedly reviving the power of hard rock, indeed pop music itself, to go beyond simple consumption into the dramatization of real emotions. In doing so, Nirvana is lifting the lid off a raging mass of social and political discontent....Like the Sex Pistols, Nirvana combines crunching rock with instantly recognizable melodies: In both cases, the front man has the power to conjure up the demons of the time.¹⁷

Today's rock critics may not believe that the rock revolution is just around the corner anymore, but the critics are still grappling with many of the same contradictions involving populism, politics, commerce, and culture that the early rock theorists had to contend with. Perhaps the optimism doesn't come as easily now. But rock critics and theorists still find reasons to argue that rock is a unique cultural force when a group like Nirvana comes along, even if there is no coherent theoretical framework in place to justify such optimism.

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But the newspaper and magazine rock critics' belief in the power of rock can also be read as a response to the organizational constraints faced by these journalists. These constraints - which were discussed in detail earlier in the thesis - range from editorial pressure to tight, late-night deadlines, and, writing under this sort of external pressure, the critic often has to resort to tried-and-true critical stances to deliver the copy on time and to the satisfaction of the editors. The best example of this is the newspaper concert review: This is probably the type of rock writing that is most likely to articulate ideas about authentic rock'n'roll and the unique relationship between performer and fan. The critic may have come to question these tenets of early rock criticism in the face of the undeniable commercialization of the music since the '60s, but the critics will still rely on these dated critical stances to make it easier to file the story on time.

The fact that rock writers still routinely champion an optimistic view of rock as being somehow more authentic than other forms of mass culture is also related to the commercial pressures that face all rock journalists, and it

comes back to the critics' ambivalence about his or her role as part of the commercial infrastructure surrounding rock artists. The critic isn't comfortable with this aspect of the profession, and a belief in the power of rock to create unique bonds between artist and audience is one way to try to counter-act that commercial function. If rock music is an art form capable of radically empowering audiences, then the critic's role can be regarded as something much more significant than that of a high-profile publicist. The rock publications - most notably Rolling Stone, but even Spin - also have a commercial interest in maintaining this view of rock music as a unique, populist form of culture because it helps justify their existence and positions them as magazines with a distinct niche in the highly competitive media market. Thus, one sees the endless series of Rolling Stone special issues celebrating its glorious past as part of the history of great, authentic rock'n'roll. Increasingly, there are many U.S. magazines that cover much of the same popular culture that one finds in Rolling Stone, but Rolling Stone can differentiate itself from a magazine like Entertainment Weekly by attempting to make claims for itself as the privileged voice of the rock generation. The irony is that

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these commercial constraints - the very forces that have called into question the founding principles of rock criticism - are helping to perpetuate the '60s-style rock theory. But perhaps the real dilemma facing rock critics - and one of the reasons they have to continually fall back on worn-out ideas from the rock criticism of an earlier era - is that no one has come along with a consistent theory of rock that gives a coherent explanation that makes sense of the complex, commercial, multi-media rock world of the '90s.

ENDNOTES

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