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Harmonizing Voices: Exploring the History and Socio-Global Impact of American Music Journalism

In a world where journalistic output is dominated by hard news, the overarching field of entertainment journalism is overlooked and underappreciated in the global sphere. When Berkely dropout Jann Wenner created *Rolling Stone* in 1967, it was because he was desperate to be a part of the “magic” he discovered: music. Although it was not the first magazine to cover the music scene, it established music journalists¹ as a part of the scene (Daly 347). Decades later, music media has stood at the forefront of “numerous journalistic developments” (McClain and Lascity 2), despite still being widely undervalued and stereotyped as trivial. Now, “[w]riting about popular music is, variously, a vehicle for self-expression and a way to make a living; a hobby and an art form; a mode of critique and a promotional activity” (Lobato and Fletcher 113). Through examining the major impacts of music journalism in America as well as the ethics that drive it, pop culture journalism begins to claim an important place in history: music journalism, and specifically music reviewing, has functioned as an important alternative to mainstream news because of its negotiation of wider societal concerns.

Audiences learn about their world through connecting with important sites like movies, television, video games, and popular journalism. Music journalism has traditionally embraced

¹ Music journalism is “fundamentally about the contextualization and appreciation of other people’s work” (Lobato and Fletcher 122).

advancing technologies and is now widely available in all forms of media. Changes in journalistic style and underlying cultural assumptions can be seen as occurring in tandem with major technological, economical, and sociological shifts. For example, with the introduction of CDs in the early 1980's, journalism began to reflect the changes in improved recording technology, unprecedented album sales, and the "oligopolistic structure of the global music industry" (Fursich 105). More recently, digital music technology has led to entirely new business models in the music industry. This is reflected in changes in writing style and underlying cultural assumptions within the music press. Fürsich and Avant-Mier identify some of these changes, such as increases in inclusivity and political content in recent music media.

Similarly, music journalism has the capacity to shape society, culture, and audiences in many ways. Appearing on the cover of a well-respected music publication like *Rolling Stone* or *Spin* can heighten fame, sex appeal, and cultural relevance. In many ways, landing a cover equates to success in the industry, because publications like these can control an artist's reputation and sales. Consumers learn most of their music knowledge through the opinions and interpretations provided by these publications. Producers, however, "seek media exposure to boost reputations and 'construct mythologies,'" (McClain and Lascity 2). This shows the extent of the power of the music press in relation to other institutions.

Music journalists make meaning for their audiences through framing, or sense making. More specifically, "the frame is the short answer to a simple yet profoundly meaning-centered question: what's going on here?" (McClain and Lascity 3). Journalists make sense of the music for their audience through description, interpretation, and evaluation, often referencing other music or long-running archetypes, narratives, and metaphors that resonate with their audience and the wider culture. Frames also delineate what ideas are relevant or worthy of attention,

establishing ideas as either “in” or “out.” An example of this is the tendency to assign genre labels and music scenes, identifying musical hierarchies. Because music journalists and critics are covering music history as it is happening, they are often responsible for “selecting which interpretive themes are best suited to framing important events” (Brennan 559). This gives them the power to validate or reject a topic in mainstream culture, acting as a curator or cultural filter on behalf of the audience².

Because of this, music criticism “is a form of cultural and social criticism” (qtd. in Fursich 104). Where traditional objective hard news often fails to connect with audiences, music reviews encourage audiences to consider relevant world issues and take a position, without presenting a prescribed ideological conclusion. These issues range from the treatment of marginalized groups to award ceremonies and reality TV. Music reviewing can ultimately recalibrate dominant positions because of this, as the journalists must ultimately shift representations of artists and fans “from essentialized/dehumanized ‘Others’³ to creative ‘One World’” (Fursich 113).

According to Ramon Lobato and Lawson Fletcher, the “pervasive nostalgia for a pre-internet era” of traditional journalistic values “now encompasses areas of journalism that were never professional to being with” (111). Because of this, modern music journalists are now forced to rely on implicit models of professionalization to regulate journalistic values that were never previously expected of them. This can be seen in the differences between entertainment trade papers and popular music criticism. Entertainment trade papers, like *Billboard* and *New*

² Because “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (qtd. in McClain and Lascity 3)

³ Expanded on in considerations for marginalized groups (pages 5-8 of this essay)

Musical Express (NME), provide a factual contextualization of music by being well-informed, up to date, flexible, and engaging. Popular music criticism like *Rolling Stone*, however, utilizes long, literary pieces “in which flair and writerly voice are privileged” (Lobato and Fletcher 114). Although publications like *Rolling Stone* incorporate elements of trade papers in their media, there is still a distinct difference in style, content, format, audience, and more. This division is just one example of the regulation of music writing through implicit models of professionalization, in this case, structure.

Changes in technology have only furthered this. With the development of the digital age, the public and journalists alike have discovered that “technology alone cannot unite organizational purpose, and that economic, institutional, and cultural factors affect news practice” (Bock et al. 147). Typically, these technologies are only adopted within a social system reflective of the values and cultures in the newsroom⁴. Similarly, “online music media has absorbed most of the functions of the music press...without necessarily replicating the industrial structures of the print economy” (Lobato and Fletcher 118). MTV is an example of a music media that has changed other industrial structures. The revolutionary entertainment cable channel capitalized on audience enjoyment by use of unconventional methods like rapid editing and shorter soundbites. By doing this, MTV defined a new style of broadcasting, which is now replicated by conventional broadcast news. With tasks now suspended between tradition journalism, public relations, cultural production and critique, and the music industry itself⁵,

⁴ See “Improvisation, Economy, and MTV Moves: Online news and video production style” by Bock et al. for more

⁵ See “Prestige and Professionalisation at the Margins of the Journalistic Field” by Ramon Lobato and Lawson Fletcher

music journalists must reconcile journalistic values with creative expression in a more diverse and expansive way.

However, research shows that stereotyping tends to be default for journalists. As Lasorsa and Dai explain, “in the presence of a mass of potential facts, stereotyping tends to occur to streamline work and ease the perceiver's discrepancy between what is expected and observed” (281). Stereotypes arise from the need to classify what is “in” and what is “out”, similar to the use of framing. This means stereotypes are learned and reinforced, or even “incorporated with irony and playfulness in music writing” (Nunes 222). Stereotyping by journalists “runs along two dimensions: first, the extent to which the reporter is apathetic (the motivation dimension) and, second, the extent to which the reporter is unengaged because of job demands (the ability dimension)” (Lasorsa and Dai 283). This can only be overcome by a reporter’s training and motivation to avoid it, but even then, they may not be able to do so. There are a variety of motivations for this, including laziness, readership increase, and stereotypic world perception. This is where journalism fails, however; the more stereotypical a story is, the more negative and disparaging it will be⁶.

One consideration of this is the portrayal of various marginalized groups in music journalism. Despite music journalism’s reputation as progressive, and therefore unprofessional, rock criticism is one example of a style that has been scolded throughout journalistic history because of its lack of diversity. Music criticism is often viewed as the most “serious” area of music writing, due in part to rock’s long-standing appropriation as a white genre⁷. Predominantly

⁶ See “When News Reporters Deceive: The Production of Stereotypes” by Lasorsa and Dai

⁷ “Whiteness can...be conceived of as a set of (classed and gendered) cultural practices that—as a result of being socially dominant—are less visible in everyday interaction than those of ethno-racial others” (Frankenberg, 1993)

white critics are met with the goal of distinguishing what qualifies as rock and what does not, and race often becomes an important factor in this. Or, as Schaap explains it, “whiteness” is then “(re)produced in the critical reception of rock music” (284). One factor in this is color-blind ideology, which indicates that all members of society are equal regardless of race, and are therefore equally responsible for their own success. This does not mean race is ignored; it simply means it is not discussed, especially in media. By disregarding the institutional advantage of whiteness, social inequality is perpetuated, although “discrimination due to color-blind ideology is often not deliberately or knowingly caused by whites” (Schaap 275).

This issue stems from the birth of the music press in the 1960’s. This era of music journalism, specifically rock criticism, established the dominant ideology still present in the field today, one which reveres “authenticity and originality, and developed a mythologised account of rock musicians that considered their work as art” (Atton 53). Along with this, however, American music journalism developed ideals of whiteness and masculinity as markers of musical excellence. An example of this is Jon Landau’s legendary review of Bruce Springsteen: “Growing Young With Rock and Roll”. It is in this piece that Landau writes “I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen,” establishing Springsteen, a heterosexual white male, as embodying everything rock’n’roll should and would become. This is unfortunately unique to American journalism, as “the dominant critical perspective in the UK proceeds not from a mythologised and masculinised account of the music, but from a sociological account that emphasises subcultures and the meaning of the music for its audience” (Atton 54).

It was during this same beginning era of music journalism in the 1960’s that rock critics began to position themselves as enlightened fans. This can be harmful because “fans are not merely consumers, not merely passive audiences: they are the meaning-makers of popular

music” (Atton 53). For example, about 20% of all 18–34-year-olds identify as LGBTQ+, with 53% of LGBT music fans claiming they would be completely lost without music (Glaad). However, with queer issues at the forefront of political conversations, LGBTQ+ discourse should be much more prominent in music media. Bringing queer struggles to the forefront of the music scene has had massive success in the past, with Freddy Mercury’s AIDS awareness concert reaching over an estimated 1 billion people⁸. However, LGBTQ+ artists, journalists, and other essential members of the industry are still underrepresented, especially in hip hop, the genre currently leading the music consumption market⁹. Stereotyping and bias in music journalism leads to the erasure of entire groups within society, reemphasizing a culture of exclusion and discrimination to its consumers.

Similarly, music is widely considered to be a masculine domain. Women are more likely to be objectified in all types of media content, including song lyrics, music videos, and journalism. In fact, a study of lyrics on the Billboard Hot 100 chart revealed six main themes: ‘men and power, sex as a top priority for males, objectification of women, sexual violence, women defined by having a man, and women as not valuing themselves” (qtd in Whipple and Coleman 2063). This sexism within the music press and music industry as a whole is so pervasive that it is self-perpetuated by both men and women journalists, continuing the vicious cycle. Whipple and Coleman’s quantitative content analysis of music articles suggests that this is because of “the overwhelming influence of professional socialization on stereotypical portrayals of women—above and beyond changing social mores, ethical imperatives and increasing diversity in newsrooms” (2073). Little progress has been made regarding the stereotyping of

⁸ See [this Billboard article](#) for more information and examples

⁹ Ethno-racially associated with black culture

women in music journalism over the past few decades, indicating a cycle similar to that of the reproduction of whiteness in rock music. In fact, a study¹⁰ found that song lyrics were more likely to objectify women from 2010-2014 than from 1990-2010, indicating a regression in the equal portrayal of women in music media. This consistent exposure to objectifying media increases self-objectification among women journalists as well. Self-objectification only reinforces the gap in representation since “[e]xposure to stereotypical media depictions of women can trigger pre-existing schemas and reinforce stereotypical gender roles in the minds of audiences who consume them in images, video, and text (Whipple and Coleman 2063).

This once again emphasizes the dichotomy music journalists face: balancing journalistic values with creative expression and opinion. It is important to consider pop culture journalism’s power over audience perception of both music and the wider world. With the power to validate or invalidate artists, concepts, and entire groups, music journalism is at the forefront of social issues worldwide. If these race, sexual orientation, and gender biases and stereotypes continue to lead the industry, it is likely that these ideologies will only be reinforced within wider culture. This shows the impact of music journalism extended beyond its traditional boundaries and expectations, which can also be seen by the adherence to cultural and professionalization standards. Outside of this structure, however, music media can be an important source for hard news and social and political discourse. Through intentional framing, music journalists have the ability to change how our history will be written, and lived, in the years to come.

¹⁰ See “Facing the music: Stereotyping of and by women in US music journalism” by Kelsey Whipple and Renita Coleman.

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