

**ROCKING AND REELING:
THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF ROCK CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

by

ALLIE GOOLRICK

(Under the Direction of James Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, rock critics and the music press have been challenged by the development of the Internet and the subsequent financial crises in the publishing and music industries. However, while scholars lament the “death of the rock critic,” a tremendous body of citizen criticism has flourished online. This study situates rock criticism within the broader history of modern criticism to examine how it is being remade in the digital age. The concept of an ideal public sphere emerged in the Enlightenment Era, where critics moderated discourse on the arts. However, due to the mass production of culture, this form of discursive criticism was never fully realized. This study posits that while the rock critic may be a dying occupation, in the digital age, rock criticism is being revitalized as a discursive practice among critics, artists, fans and citizen critics that may be more reflective of an Enlightenment model.

INDEX WORDS: Rock Criticism; Rock Music; Music Magazines; Cultural Criticism; Modern Critic; Enlightenment Era; Cultural Industries; Music Blogs; Music Magazines; Public Sphere; Citizen Journalism.

**ROCKING AND REELING:
THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF ROCK CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

by

ALLIE GOOLRICK

B.A., Emerson College, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

© 2011

Allie Goolrick

All Rights Reserved

**ROCKING AND REELING:
THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF ROCK CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

by

ALLIE GOOLRICK

Major Professor: James Hamilton

Committee: Barry Hollander
Nate Kohn

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2011

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated first and foremost to my parents, who have never faltered in encouraging me as a writer—whether I was penning a novel instead of paying attention in 11th grade English, working late nights for *Paste* to score one more interview with one more rock star, frantically sending off a screenplay to Sundance or nearly losing my mind over this thesis.

I would also like to dedicate this study to the memory of my mentor and friend Dr. Klaus Phillips, who told me to give my creative instincts a chance and afforded me the opportunity to make a life's work of doing what I love. Thank you all for your support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge Dr. James Hamilton, who stuck with me through an ambitious and ever-evolving project. Without his good humor, patience and feedback this study would never have seen the light of day. Thank you Jay for always assuring me I was up for the task and for your enthusiasm about the material.

I would also like to thank Dr. Nate Kohn for being a champion of both my academic and creative work—and Dr. Barry Hollander for his insight into social media and the public sphere.

Finally, I would like to thank Steve LaBate, Julie Phillips, Alec Wooden, Michelle Gilzenrat, Allison Weiss and Sara Fox, whose participation in my Rock Symposium at the Athens Institute of Contemporary Art gave me the valuable insight that inspired this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
1 The Modern Critic	6
The Critic Emerges.....	7
Challenging the Critic.....	12
The Cultural Industries.....	15
2 Rock Music and Its Criticism.....	18
Rock & Revolution.....	19
The Rock Critic	25
Echoes of Enlightenment	31
3 The Rock Critic and the Web.....	33
Convergence Culture.....	35
Spiraling Industries	37
A New Model Emerges	42
4 Rock Criticism as Discourse	47
The Death of the Rock Critic	49
Rock Criticism as Discourse	53
CONCLUSION.....	60
WORKS CITED.....	63

INTRODUCTION

In June of 2009, *Rolling Stone* journalist Christopher R. Weingarten delivered a speech at the annual Twitter Conference in which he claimed that the rock critic is dead. His assertion sounded dire, but between a crisis in the American newspaper industry and a shift from a digital to an online culture, Weingarten's fear was close to reality.

In the 2000s, numerous major music magazines, including the leading African American rag *Vibe* and indie favorites *No Depression* and *Blender*, ceased publication while arts and features sections in local newspapers grew increasingly slim. Like other print publications, music magazines were challenged by advancing computer technology and the explosion of digital publishing platforms. As blogs and other free content providers mushroomed, print publications grappled with soaring print costs, declining subscription rates, and unsuccessful attempts to monetize online advertising.

For music journalism, the problem was compounded by the simultaneous decline of another industry—the music business. The digital age has led to a drastic change in the way fans find, purchase, and consume music. Where just ten years ago the compact disc generated billions annually, in the point-and-click generation, CDs are all but extinct. Digital purchasing platforms like iTunes offer single tracks with the simple click—which, in addition to making the CD obsolete, threatens to make the record *itself* obsolete.

And so, music journalism finds itself in the center of the perfect storm: the juncture of two failing industries.

As McLeese argues, “It’s like the multimedia version of the Heisenberg principle, but with both entities in motion, as music journalists attempt to cover the artistry generated by a plummeting industry within newspapers and magazines that themselves represent a plummeting industry” (McLeese 2010, p. 434).

And yet, while professional critical publications flounder, a new form of critical work has flourished on the Internet. The late 2000s saw an explosion of online publishing platforms, from blogs to microblogs to social networking sites including Facebook, MySpace and Twitter—the creation of which had a tremendous impact on the way people communicate, process information, and live out both their day-to-day and digital lives. Of course, the significance of social networking extended to arts criticism: user-generated content platforms allowed everyone from the professional journalist to the wanna-be rock critic to engage in forms of “citizen criticism” online.

Though major professional critical outlets like *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* have thus far survived the crisis of print journalism, and others (including *Vibe*, *Paste*, and *Blender*) have reformed online, in the digital age music criticism seems less and less the province of “professional” critics—and more and more the product of an unlimited public forum, one in which conceivably everyone’s voice can be heard. From article-length blogs to 140-character tweets, consumers seem to have an unprecedented ability to voice their own opinions—and to be heard. In response to the increased sense of agency that social networking sites have fostered, consumer sites like Amazon and iTunes have incorporated user reviews and rating systems. Newspaper and magazine websites have created online forums for their readerships, while news portals like CNN have done so through iReports and “open stories.” Even professional music publications are jumping on the social-media bandwagon: Most publications now feature blog entries and

encourage user-generated content and ratings. In fact, the Internet has allowed for a public that is so easily able to contribute to and produce media that it's often hard to tell "real" journalism from citizen journalism.

But while statistics on music magazines are bleak, it could be argued that in the critic's ability to dialogue with the public, new discursive spaces are emerging that will change our entire conception of criticism. Now anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can take on a critical role and engage in critical dialogue, ultimately devaluing the authority of professional critics with so-called "expertise." In some ways, this constantly evolving critical discourse between journalists and consumers represents a utopian ideal—one where opinions aren't simply handed down to the masses, and where ordinary citizens can truly be heard.

The key questions this study seeks to pose emerge from this evolving situation. How is the digital age remaking criticism? How are discursive spaces like social networking sites changing our need for criticism and remaking its role? Does the public have the power and ability to become an effective critical body? Do we, in truth, have the ability to distinguish the "good" from the "bad?" If so, what is the worth of criticism in an age where conceivably everyone can be a critic?

While scholarship does exist on the crisis facing music critics, much of it is limited to the immediate circumstances surrounding the decline in printed music magazines and the subsequent "death" of rock criticism as a profession. This study seeks to construct a broader framework through which to examine how rock criticism is being remade in the digital age by taking a critical and historic approach. Looking back to when the modern critic—and the public sphere—emerged is essential to this study, as the history of critical practice and its relationship with the public sphere poses important questions for the present-day criticisms taking place in a new digital public sphere that seems to offer infinite possibilities.

In fact, realizing a perfect “public sphere” has been an ambition since the early-modern era—and the argument rages on today about whether or not the Internet can represent it. It was during the Enlightenment Era that the idea of free and rational discourse amongst an educated public was first conceived—and notably it was during this period as well that the modern critic emerged. While a rising professional class challenged traditional systems of hierarchy, in the early 18th century a growing public who were more educated and engaged in urban and artistic life created a bourgeois public sphere that was eager for forums in which to discuss culture and modern life. (McDonald 2007, p. 53). Critics of the Enlightenment Era, however, argue that because of the proliferation of mass culture, the concept of a truly enlightened public was never realized.

While many scholars have lamented the death of criticism, few have suggested the ways in which the Internet may mirror an Enlightenment model for criticism in which the critical discourse is privileged over the object of criticism—and over the critic. Could the age of participatory digital culture represent an ideal that has been sought since the beginning of the modern era? Does the Internet promote the rational, democratic, and informed public discussion that the bourgeoisie envisioned?

Though these questions could relate to all forms of art criticism, for the purposes of this study, the focus will be on rock criticism specifically because of the unique challenges—and advantages—of the genre. First and foremost, as stated above, music magazines seem to have been hit particularly hard because of crises in both industries they relied on—the print press and the major record label system. However, the challenges to traditional forms of rock criticism are far more complex than economics, as are the reasons for its survival in online environments. Listening to music is a uniquely subjective experience and, according to most scholars, key to

identity formation in youth. Those factors combined with the increased sense of agency that is inherent in online publishing platforms make rock criticism an ideal practice in which to examine the potential for user-generated criticism and more discursive forms of critical practice as a whole.

Through a comparative examination of emergence of the modern critic, the professional rock critic, and the ways rock criticism as a practice is being remade online, this study seeks to present criticism as a cyclic practice that takes different forms and serves different functions for different generations. As such, Chapter 1 of this study will examine the circumstances in which the modern critic arose during the Enlightenment Era and the challenges the idealized bourgeoisie critic faced during a period of rapid industrialization. Chapter 2 will narrow the focus to rock criticism specifically by presenting a thorough account of the circumstances in which rock music and rock criticism materialized, how rock criticism's emergence may have echoed that of modern criticism, and how the rock critic functioned in society.

Chapter 3 will turn to the “death of the rock critic” in the late 20th century, examining the economic, technological and social circumstances that preceded a crisis in the music industry, before turning to how and why rock criticism is being remade online. Finally, Chapter 4 will make a case that the traditional “arbiter of taste” model for rock criticism is perhaps less relevant to audiences in light of convergence culture and the sense of increased critical agency in a digital public sphere. By drawing on the historical framework presented in earlier chapters, this study will posit that rock criticism has returned to the more discursive model of criticism in which the public discussion on rock music has a value beyond directing consumers on what to purchase. If during the Enlightenment the discourse on the arts was thought to be a prerequisite for political engagement, then this study takes a step towards opening up a line of inquiry about the potential value of a widening dialogue about rock music specifically—and popular culture as a whole.

CHAPTER 1

THE MODERN CRITIC

Theorists widely agree that “modern” criticism emerged in the Enlightenment era, during a period in which rapid industrialization created a burgeoning middle class with more leisure time to engage in the arts. After a long history of arts patronage by the wealthy, the ability for members of a middle-class, educated public to engage in rational discourse about the arts served to lessen class divides and encouraged political engagement. Furthermore, advances in printing technology allowed for certain informed participants in the public sphere to publish opinions on politics and the arts to a growing bourgeoisie readership. However, unlike later critics, the modern critic himself remained largely within the public sphere as a facilitator of the public discourse rather than standing above it.

This chapter will examine the circumstances in which the modern critic emerged before drawing on economic theorists to explore why the idealized modern critic remained just that—an ideal. The proliferation of mass culture was to swiftly and profoundly challenge the modern critic, who by his increasing authority was less appealing to a society intent on resisting authoritarian forms of government. However, much of the identity and function of the critic, as forged in the Enlightenment Era, continues to inform criticism today.

The Critic Emerges:

According to McDonald, “An early an abiding sense of the word ‘critic’ in English is one who carps, complains or backbites” (McDonald 2007, p.41). Despite the negative connotations, the word “critic” stems from the Greek *kritos*, which translates more closely to the words “disseminate” and “judge.” Cultural criticism has been ingrained in the fabric of Western society since classical antiquity, often serving as an authoritative voice in helping the public to determine the worth and value of art. However, the journalistic or “modern” critic did not emerge until the Enlightenment Era—when “a rising professional class gain(ed) power and wealth, creating a bloc to challenge the traditional monopoly of aristocratic privilege” (McDonald 2007, p. 53).

Defined by Eagleton as a “struggle against the absolutist state,” the Enlightenment Era represented a power shift from the brutal and authoritarian state towards a liberated and growing public who were able to engage in social life. Within coffee shops and social clubs, a new “bourgeoisie public” came together to engage in reasonable discourse—which Eagleton views as a precursor to gaining political power (Eagleton 2005, p. 9). Much of this public discussion centered on art, which was seen as representing the authoritarian regime (Eagleton 2005, p. 9). As the bourgeoisie carved out an enlightened public sphere, the growing professional class challenged the traditional assumption that art belonged and was only available to the wealthy. Where “elite” forms of art and culture had been the province of the rich, now middle class paying audiences could purchase art and attend theater and music concerts. Furthermore, people could engage with the arts in the privacy of their own homes. As Crossley and Roberts argue, “the private consumption of artistic and literary works...contributed to the privatization of

subjectivity” (2004, p. 6). “Self cultivation” through private engagement on the arts became the mark of an educated individual, no matter the class (Crossley and Roberts 2004, p. 2).

The formulation of individual opinion was crucial to then being able to engage in public debate. Discussion of the arts in a growing number of coffeehouses and saloons became a serious enterprise (Eagleton 2005, p. 9). Embedded in the idealism of the Enlightenment Era was a belief in universal reason, and therefore the potential for consensus in a society that chose to participate in “reasonable” dialogue. Within the public sphere, “large numbers of middle class men, qua private individuals, come together to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual issues and concern, creating a space in which both new ideas and the practices and discipline of rational public debate were cultivated” (Crossley and Roberts 2004, p. 2).

It was in these conditions that the critical spirit would flourish and the critic would take on a respected role in society (McDonald 2007, p. 54). Now that the public could engage in the arts, there was a growing need for individuals informed on matters of taste, technique, and form to regulate and inform that discourse. Improvements to the printing press allowed magazines and periodicals “aimed at a literate audience” to flourish, which “provided a platform for cultural, social and literary debate and conversation” (McDonald 2007, p. 53). McDonald argues further that “Periodicals like “Richard Steele’s *Tattler*, Joseph Addison’s and Steele’s *Spectator* and Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler*, inaugurated a vital vehicle for public discourse” (2007, p. 53). New critical publications often comprised political and literary essays that far surpassed simply judgment or reaction, implying “explanation, commentary, summary, analysis, interpretation, decoding and so on” and were meant to spark public debate (McDonald 2007, p. 32-53).

In what McDonald describes as an “intellectual movement from below,” critics in these early periodicals became “responsible not just for regulated neo-classical decorum but for

circulating the civilized values of society” (2007, p. 54). In alignment with principals of rationality and harmony, there was a sense that standards of taste for all cultures were universal and that “enlightened and cultivated participants in the public sphere” were needed to interpret those standards from within (McDonald 2007, p. 55). Charged with asking deep questions about the value and function of art in society, the critic was expected to evaluate works of art through a lens of universal aesthetic principles to determine their worth and meaning for the public (Habermas 1989). Thus early modern critics acted as powerful arbiters of taste, distinguishing “high” culture from “low” and, in a sense, maintaining the moral and ethical landscape of an age.

However, unlike critics today, remaining *within* the public sphere was essential for the early Enlightenment-Era critic. In the push towards universal rationality, it was assumed that all people—despite class or intellect—had the basic capacity for critical thinking and a responsibility to participate in a cultural dialogue (Eagleton 2005, p. 21). Rather than generating opinion from above, the early critic was ideally the regulator of a discussion that was already taking place—the speaker for a new group of informed and educated participants in the public sphere rather than someone who stood above it (Eagleton 2005, p. 21).

It was this idealized positioning of the critic within the public sphere that formed the basis for a growing debate on the function of the critic in society and his value (Habermas 1989). As critical publications flourished and criticism became more of a specialized field of literary production, two lines of critical inquiry began to emerge: the role of the critic and the broader role and value of criticism in society.

Clearly, part of the critic’s role was pedagogic: for a growing public able to purchase and consume the arts, “critics of the period were ciphers for deep cultural questions about the value, the proper function, and the correct techniques and forms of art and literature” (McDonald 2007,

p. 55). However, during the Enlightenment, many of these standards were considered to be universal. As such, in a direct affront to authoritarianism, critics acted not so much as judges of works of art but as “enlightened and cultivated participants in the public sphere” who simply maintained those standards (McDonald 2007, p. 32).

English critic John Dryden’s definition of the role of the literary critic exemplifies those claims: for Dryden, the critic’s job was to “observe those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader,” and then explain *why* those “excellencies” are delightful (McDonald 2007, p. 51). The word “reasonable” is significant here, because it suggests that despite the pedagogic function of the critic, his readership was still an equal who was able to distinguish good art from bad. The critic’s job was not to generate the opinion itself, but to shed some light onto what led the “reasonable” individual to come to that opinion on his or her own terms.

Oscar Wilde echoed Dryden’s definition, suggesting that the critic wasn’t as much critical as interpretive. He was less an authoritative voice than a moderator who created a constant forum for dialogue between artist, critic, and public. The role of the Enlightenment critic was fundamentally discursive in nature: enabling an ongoing conversation between the educated critic and the equally educated public (Wilde 1888).

Wilde, however, amplified the role of the critic, suggesting that criticism was in fact more important to artistic production than the artist himself. Arguing that the critical “faculty” is the driving force behind artistic production, Wilde claimed that new forms of art will only emerge out of an age in which the critical spirit is in full force—that otherwise, the tendency of the artist is to reproduce previous ideas, making art stagnant. Says Wilde, “An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all” (Wilde 1888).

Wilde makes an impassioned argument for the value of criticism in society: if, at its base, criticism is the ability to engage in intelligent dialogue about culture, then his real fear is not just for an age with no criticism—but for an age with no intellectual freedom at all. In fact, Wilde’s definition illustrates what would become the foundation for critical studies: the idea that the cultivation of the critical faculty is a precursor to political action—and to the potential for freedom itself (Wilde 1888).

In this regard, the critic’s function far surpassed engagement with the arts, but served as the training grounds for a new intellectual class to engage in political dialogue. As Eagleton notes, “A polite, informed public opinion pits itself against the arbitrary dictates of autocracy” (2005, p. 9). In the Enlightenment Era, the development of a new ruling class, or at least a class that could challenge the authoritarian state, was first contingent on the cultivation of cultural taste and literacy (Eagleton 2005, p. 11-14). In turn, the critic was important to the creation of an upwardly mobile class not because of his abilities as a critic alone, but simply for his ability to speak in public side-by-side with the aristocracy (Eagleton 2005, p. 14).

The public sphere was a fundamental part of this reasoned society, as the “exchange of opinions” was no longer limited to private reflection as it often was in an authoritarian state (Eagleton 2005, p. 10). The critic was central to articulating the reasoned opinions of this public, acting as a moderator. As Eagleton argues, “The truly free market is that of cultural discourse itself, within, of course, certain normative regulations’ the role of the critic is to administer those norms, in a double refusal of absolutism and anarchy” (2005, p.15). In contrast to “professional” critics that later became the staples of newspapers and magazines, the value was not as much on the critic as the act of criticism itself. As criticism became more and more professionalized, however, fractures with the Enlightenment model of criticism were to emerge:

Challenging the Critic

Despite these arguments over the fundamental importance of criticism in society, for many scholars the Enlightenment model for criticism is an idealized and contradictory notion. Eagleton argues that the “critic” was never really realized, but rather, merely a symbolic construct in a society that was desperately pushing back on authoritarianism (2005, p. 22). As soon as criticism became an occupation with a certain economic function (that is, directing the newly enfranchised middle classes on which culture to consume), critics began to wield more authority over audiences. As the concept of a “public” emerged out of a struggle against authoritarianism in any form, then the idea that the very person who was supposed to regulate the public discourse became an authoritative figure immediately challenged his stature and function (Eagleton 2005, p. 17).

Rapid industrialization further compounded the problem. In the Enlightenment Era, ideas of universal aesthetic standards largely governed discussion about the arts. However, as capitalism emerged, “cultural determinations are now clearly being set from elsewhere” and the public sphere is “invaded by visibly ‘private’ commercial and economic interests, fracturing its confident consensualism” (Eagleton 2005, p. 34). Where a majority of the bourgeoisie discourse concerned “high art,” or art that had once been available only to the wealthy, in the age of mass production the “folk art” that was once characteristic of the lower classes was now being commercially produced, threatening Enlightenment-era aesthetic standards.

Not only were critics required to articulate the reevaluation of artistic standards for the public; in the face of mass culture, that public became increasingly anonymous. Where the act of criticism had been communal within the bourgeoisie public sphere, as mass culture proliferated,

the critic's pedagogic function strengthened, turning members of the public into "the object of educational aims rather than a co-subject" (Lindberg et al. 2010, p. 15).

Certainly, critical agency was increasing, but that development was perhaps more a function of the public's decreasing ability to respond, which is essential to "discourse." Criticism instead was quickly becoming "professional and specialized business" that was a commodity in and of itself (Lindberg et al. 2010, p. 15). Not only did the public have to choose what culture to pursue, but also which critical publication to guide their pursuits, choices that inherently led to a market-based evaluation of what was "good criticism." Where criticism has its brief moment of being an intellectualist movement from below, critical publications soon became part of mass culture—products that competed with similar products to be purchased and consumed. Both the critic himself and the criticism thus produced became commodities.

A major issue facing critics of the period was whether or not criticism should continue to serve only the intellectual classes in light of a growing "reading public hungry for information" (Eagleton 2005, p. 48). As the bourgeoisie ideology became more fractured, concerns grew about the preservation of high art in what Bennett calls a "mass society. As Bennett argues, "mass society has been accompanied by the formation of a new type of culture – 'mass culture' – which in its pervasiveness, threatens to undermine, to destroy by contamination, the qualities of moral and aesthetic excellence inscribed in the "high culture" of the educated elite" (1988, p. 36). Ironically, where criticism prior to mass production was an attempt to create a new intellectual class, the growing literacy of less-educated classes started to create a serious fracture in the consensual critical identity.

To make sense of changes in criticism brought about by mass culture, Eagleton delineates three new critical identities, none of which fits the ideology of the Enlightenment critic. At one

extreme was what Eagleton calls “the Sage” critic; in an effort to preserve universal aesthetic values (high culture) and resist becoming authoritarian, the sage had to fundamentally remove himself from society and dispel his lofty opinions from above—an affront to the power of critical discourse (Eagleton 2005). As “an intellectual who was elevated above the public sphere and whose job was not simply to spark debate on taste, but to directly inform it,” the sage took some if not all critical agency from the public he was trying to inform (Eagleton 2005, p. 31).

In direct contrast, the second type (whom Eagleton labels “the critical hack”) aimed to preserve high culture by situating himself firmly within the broadening public sphere, which necessarily made him as much of a mass commodity as the culture he was attempting to criticize (Eagleton 2005, p. 30). As many critical publications began to cater to a less educated readership, critics began to develop unique voices and competing styles and literary forms, not all of which were as revered as when early modern criticism first emerged. As an early example, Eagleton scathingly characterizes respected critic Samuel Johnson’s evolving style of rhyming prose as “a sort of trademark or brand name, a stubbornly idiosyncratic attempt to preserve ‘personality’ in an era of increasingly anonymous, commodified literary production” (2005, p. 31).

The third critical identity Eagleton identifies was an uneasy pairing of the two, labeled “the man of letters,” whom he defined as “more nebulous than ‘creative writer’, [but] not quite synonymous with scholar, critic or journalist” (Eagleton 2005, p. 45). Born out of the necessity to survive within the constraints of capitalism, the man of letters works both within the public sphere (and in this case, the world of mass production) while simultaneously not wielding enough authority over it to be a threat (Eagleton 2005, p. 45). Says Eagleton, “if the sage’s judgments are aloofly authoritarian, the man of letters, attached to one or more of the great

Victorian periodicals, is still striving to weld together a public sphere of enlightened public discourse” (2005, p. 47).

However, Eagleton recognizes that even the man of letters had to take a “covertly propagandist posture towards his growing readership,” which, unlike the intellectual elite that characterized the bourgeoisie, was composed of “an amorphous, variably educated, culturally philistine middle class” (Eagleton 2005, p. 49-50). While the man of letters may have tried to preserve the Enlightenment-Era model for criticism, his aims turned to educating “an anonymous object whose sentiments and opinions are to be molded by techniques of intellectual simplification” (2005, p. 49).

It seemed that as a mass mediated society trumped the bourgeoisie public sphere, critics continued to desperately cling to the ideal of creating a discourse on “high art” that represented their liberation. However, as industrialization chugged along, it became clear that the Enlightenment ideal for criticism as a rational discourse between educated subjects was quickly being lost.

The Cultural Industries

Subsequent theorists would argue that, in fact, the idea of trying to reclaim a public sphere that was engaged in rational discourse was impossible from the moment that culture became mass produced. For the Frankfurt school, instead of intellectual liberation, the industrialization that sparked the Enlightenment era led to a form of cultural enslavement that was so repressive to individual rationale that the culture industry contained even criticism of it. Though art may have had a brief moment of being liberated from the aristocracy, it was now in the hands of a new form of aristocracy, one that was economically driven and created consumers

as rational subjects, which eviscerated the liberating potential of art and its discourse (Adorno and Horkheimer 1989, p.122).

The problem for criticism was compounded by the fact that advances in publishing technologies and expanding means of distribution were creating a particular form of mass culture: the mass media. Not only was mass culture threatening the high/low cultural hierarchy, but so were the spaces originally meant to preserve it.

As evidenced by the man of letters described above, according to Bennett, where previous forums for public discourse were “vehicles of enlightenment, popular education and the press are regarded (now) as reducing the intelligence to the level of the lowest common denominator—the promoters of a moral and intellectual mediocrity” (1988, p. 34).

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in the age of mass production, art itself has been reduced to commodities that, in their variety, rationalize consumption: “all manner of products are available so that none may escape” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1989, p. 122). This presented quite the challenge to critics, who, by the early 20th century ended up participating in manufactured culture despite their aims at maintaining the discursive ideology of bourgeois criticism. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that “What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and the range of choice” (1988, p. 123). The concern was that the mass culture had reduced the autonomy of the arts to the point that critics functioned only to help audiences differentiate between various forms of kitschy mass art; high art was no longer a part of the equation (MacDonald 1957). For those trying to preserve the bourgeoisie public, a potential loss of high art in society was a devastating prospect as loss of agency was thought to lead ultimately to fascism. In this pessimistic view, both culture and the public are wholly controlled by the culture industry, reducing the critic to simply another cog in

the wheel, unable to get out of the endless cycle of oppressive and alienating production and consumption.

For a period in the early 20th century, it would seem that the public's desire for the social stability that capitalism produced deferred concerns about how the culture industries might affect art. But concerns about the effects of mass culture—in particular the mass media—reached a fever pitch in the decades following World Wars I and II, where propaganda revealed that the media “possessed extraordinary power to shape the beliefs and conduct of ordinary men and women” (Carey 1997, p. 111).

Ironically, as new forms of folk culture began to emerge and be disseminated through radio and television, new debates would arise about the value of forms of popular culture, and these debates would re-energize criticism. It was within these debates that critics were to regain their relevance by beginning to whittle away at the problematic high/low culture divide. As the following chapter will demonstrate, one form in particular of this newly branded “popular culture” was to cause a drastic shift in views on culture in a mass society: rock music.

CHAPTER 2

ROCK MUSIC AND ITS CRITICISM

Rock criticism emerged in the 1960s and is bound up with the rise of rock music. Interestingly, both were born during a period of social and political upheaval that both mirrors and is directly influenced by the struggles in the Enlightenment Era. Where Enlightenment Era struggles were against an absolutist, hierarchical system of government, it could be argued that in the 60s, the struggle was against the absolutism of culture that industrialization predicated. For the purposes of this study, a clear differentiation is made between the 1950s style of rock n' roll and the rock music of the 60s, which built on the rhythmic style of rock n'roll but had a decidedly more revolutionary bent.

As Frankfurt School scholars argued, industrialization had led to the widespread commercialization of culture, and therefore, from the outset rock criticism arose in markedly different circumstances than early modern criticism. However, fueled by the political atmosphere of the sixties, the emergence of rock criticism does exhibit some remarkable parallels to the emergence of the modern critic—and likewise would face struggles created by its integration into mainstream commercial culture. A major differentiation is it was the object of rock criticism, rock music, which was to offer cultural liberation rather than the critical discourse itself. However, the development of rock music and subsequently rock criticism would serve a critical purpose in a mass mediated society by legitimizing popular culture and beginning to dissolve the high/low art divide. The following chapter will first trace the circumstances in which

rock music was popularized before turning to the emerging field of rock criticism and its function in society.

Rock & Revolution

By the mid 1940s, a combination of modernization, a capitalist economic structure and the end of two World Wars had led to increased social stability, but also to significant changes in social life. While the emphasis on patriotism and togetherness lingered after World War II, increased social mobility and urbanization led to the reevaluation of what it meant to be a community in the melting pot of American cities and suburbs. Lindberg et al. argue that though society was thoroughly modernized by the 60s, the pre-industrial moral codes of a more agrarian society tended to remain intact, creating an “illusion of coherence and stability in a rapidly changing world” (2005, p.54). Social institutions like schools and churches, suburban living and emphasis on family reflected the “rationalization of economy, institutions and social life” that was closely tied in with consumerism and the growing influence of the mass media (Lindberg et al 2005, p. 53).

At the same time, cultural and political stability, despite being tenuous, had produced more affluence amongst the working classes and therefore, more leisure time. This growing affluence was particularly significant among the youth. In particular, the suburban lifestyle carved out the space for “modern” teenagers, who for the first time had real buying power. At the same time, as Lindberg et al. argue, the cultural and moral codes traditionally in place were becoming increasingly irrelevant to younger generations, who faced “heavy pressure from increasing consumption, changed urban milieus, (and) mass communication” (2005, p. 54). Instead of buying into the functional consumerism of their parents’ generation, these newly

affluent teenagers “tended to use their growing spending power on leisure goods connected with a youthful lifestyle” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 56).

The word “lifestyle” is notable here because of its affiliation with studies of the centrality of identity during periods of cultural change. According to Frith, the relative social stability of the postwar years created, paradoxically, the freedom of leisure along with the intense loneliness of having that freedom. Ziehe argues further that the loss of the relevance of existing social codes often inspire a “frantic search for meaning”—characterized by a revisiting of the past in search of more “authentic” forms of culture (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 55). Far from being limited to the past, Frith suggests that authenticity is based in class struggle, past or present. He argued that younger generations longed for the “sense of solidarity and danger” that faced lower class communities and were accordingly drawn to the music of the street (Frith 2007, p. 39). The fascination of “working class” music was an affront to the suburban “rationalized” existence in which some sense of community had been lost.

Accordingly, in the 1940s and 1950s there was a revival of American “folk music,” which Frith defines as “made directly, spontaneously, by the rural communities themselves; it was the music of working people and expressed their communal experience of work” (2007, p. 32). As opposed to popular music, which perpetuated alienation, folk music was charged not only with communicating “the lost sense of community,” but with creating it. Folk music emphasized communal singing, and to some extent, dissolved the distance between performer and audience.

As Frith argues, what the 1960s folk music that middle-class teenage culture drew on was, in fact, the music of a previous generation: rock n’ roll. As a form of white working-class music that itself drew on African American culture, rock n’ roll had been popularized in the

1950s as “the music of traveling black and white dance bands” rooted in the “rhythmic singing, [...] hard-driving beat, [...] bluesy melody and [...] improvised, stream-of-consciousness words” that was characteristic of African-American gospel. In the 1950s, “rocking and reeling” had found its way into secular music all over America (Palmer 1992, p. 4). This was due in large part to the relocation of rural Southern musicians to urban areas, “who were taming irregular rural forms to the demands of urban accompaniment, often including horns, piano, bass and drums” (Palmer 1992, p. 4). At the same time, “Southwestern blues and jazz musicians were experimenting with a revolutionary new instrument, the electric guitar” (Palmer 1992, p. 8).

In the early 1950s, the term “rock n’ roll” was synonymous with R&B, both of which were “the music industry’s generic term for any popular music primarily produced and consumed by African-Americans.” However, a generation of young white musicians was being influenced by the melding of styles taking place in the African-American musical landscape. In 1954, Bill Haley and His Comets are considered to have been the first white group to have a rock n’ roll hit, but it was the phenomenon of Elvis Presley that would solidify rock n’ roll’s popularity for white audiences.

Elvis emerged in the early 1950s when widening affluence had begun to spark the younger generations’ fantasies about class struggle. Teenage life in the 1950s was characterized by a certain romanticized idea of a young man dissatisfied with the expectations set up for him by his parents—the “rebel without a cause.” Despite being from impoverished rural Mississippi, Elvis grew up on the films of James Dean and took on a “rebel” persona that perfectly fed into younger generation’s fantasies about class struggle. Rock n’ roll music was, from the outset, more rebellious and aggressive than its pop counterparts, suggesting the dissatisfaction then brewing amongst youth about the social rationalization they felt oppressed by. Frith argues that

in the 1950s the genre was successful, in part, because it “rock n’ roll accounts of the loneliness and rebellion *celebrated* the conditions that produced them” (p. 38). Frith argues further that the experience of rock n’ roll in the 1950s was “an experience of [...] teenage community” that privileged being “exclusionary” (Frith 2007, p. 38).

Despite this appeal to rebellion, the genre had lost some of its original significance by the 1960s as it became more and more commodified (Frith 2007, p. 38). A style that had originated in folk culture had now become mass-produced. However, because rock n’ roll was considered by many a form of folk music, rock music managed to resist being labeled as “pop” despite its commercialization because of the sense of “authentic” community in which it was originally rooted. Contrary to the pessimism not only of the Frankfurt School but also of American mass-culture critics over the cultural industries, Benjamin suggests that resistance persisted in the ability to *reproduce* culture—in this case, through records—which removed listeners from the moment of production and put them into the position of the critic. Buck-Morss argues that “the ubiquity of the reproductions turns everyone into an *expert*, hence a potential *participant*” (Buck-Morss, p. 268). For middle-class youth in the 1960s who were now thoroughly suburbanized and raised with the mass media, it was perhaps in the reproduction of music—on TV, over the radio—that the world of rock became a participatory community.

It is important to note that most theorists agree over the potential in music—whether reproduced or not—for participation and shared experience. According to Pratt, sound creates a space that is “identifiable with a basic psychological sense of freedom” (Pratt 1990, p. 22). Pratt argues further that human beings are naturally inclined to respond to sound/music, which often has the ability to “stop time or make us feel like we are living in a moment, with no memory or anxiety about what has come before, what will come after” (Pratt 1990, p. 22). That sense of an

“alternative reality” or dream world, where collective identity is forged through shared experience of “free space,” creates a utopian space, or perfect community in which people can become empowered and may even “sense the possibility of enormous and positive changes” (Pratt 1990, p. 39). For adolescents, who almost universally confront loneliness and alienation no matter what the era, music is an emotional release. Empowerment in turn is often a product of the intense emotional revelry or catharsis that music often provides (Pratt 1990).

Thus, to tie matters of identity together with rock ‘n’ roll and the emerging political situation of the 1960s that was increasingly articulated along generational lines, listening to rock music became an escape for suburban teens from the straitjackets of their rationalized lives. According to Eyerman and Jamison, discussing and sharing recorded rock music within peer groups helped to contribute to a general sort of self-awareness for teenagers, one that encouraged both music-making and participation in politics (Pratt 2002, Eyerman and Jamison 1995). Indeed, the collective identification fostered around rock ‘n’ roll became clearer by the 1960s, when a developing bohemian culture found on college campuses mixed folk ideologies with rock music. Imbedded in a new generation of rock music was a revolutionary spirit, the sense that participating in it could lead to positive social change. Rock music became the place to articulate the values of a newly mobile society that was facing racial tensions, the Vietnam War and a cultural revolution based on both bohemian and utopian ideals. According to Eyerman and Jamison, “Like theory, the best popular songs of the time identified social problems, gave names to age feelings of alienation and oppressions, and even offered explanations, albeit in poetic forms” (Eyerman and Jamison 1995, p. 464).

Far from being a repressive force, the mass media spread this newly politically charged rock music to suburban youth. However, its positioning *within* popular culture, however

ideologically situated it was outside of it, led to endless critical debates regarding its “authenticity.” The fact that rock music was a business—and a rapidly expanding one—threatened the authentic nature that made its predecessor rock n’ roll so appealing (Jones 2002, p. 33).

As Lindberg et al. argue, the criteria for evaluation of new forms of culture by the mid 20th century for the most part had moved away from a “high and popular culture” dialectic as popular culture was recognized to at least have entertainment value. What was at stake for rock music was whether it displayed any value beyond the commercial. Through Bourdieu, Lindberg et al. describe the dialectic for rock music as being between “heteronomous” culture—which only had value as commercial entertainment and “autonomous” culture, which was considered a purer form of art (Lindberg et al. 2010, p. 2). In order to produce anything of value, rock musicians had to both work within the mass media and resist it, to simultaneously “articulate the thoughts and desires of an audience and not pander to the ‘mainstream’ by diluting their sound and their message” (Jones 2002, p. 32). In other words, musicians had to work both within the commercial or heteronomous realm—and outside of it—in order to be considered authentic.

Rock criticism was to emerge out of a need for an “expert” in rock music to differentiate between “authentic” rock and its “inauthentic” imitations from within the realm of popular culture. While previous developments in musical styles (jazz in particular) had quickly been elevated to a high-culture status, the necessity for rock music to continue represent class struggle called for an entirely new model of evaluation—one that would be forged from within the rock community itself:

The Rock Critic

Many conventions established in the early 60s still inform music criticism, at least until recently. Theorists generally agree that a small core of rock critics eventually pioneered the style. However, early on, professional music critics often wouldn't acknowledge rock music at all. Lindberg et al. argue that, "until the mid-sixties, writing on rock music still amounted to little more than news and gossip," with the music press still primarily a slave to the record industry with its main aim being the promotion of what might sell (2002, p. 41). The first organic writing about rock emerged not surprisingly from within the younger generations for whom rock constituted such an important source of critique and identification. Fan magazines (fanzines), which were often created by individual rock enthusiasts and self-produced, served as the stomping grounds for future rock criticism, but most theorists agree those attempts at rock criticism were more oriented towards adoration than rigorous criticism. Still, as more and underground publications addressing rock music emerged, a clear distinction began to develop between the fan/trade magazines and what would evolve into critical magazines.

However, the evolution of one into the other was difficult and diffuse. Lindberg et al. suggest that the mainstream press hesitated in generating criticism of rock music because changes in style and form were taking place so quickly that journalists simply took a long time to establish a framework in which to address it. Many of what are considered the first "real" rock magazines originated in the U.K., where rock music was also making its mark on culture and was received by critics with higher regard. In fact, American rock magazines were modeled after British music magazines like *New Music Exchange* and *Melody Maker*, which were quicker to address rock music in a serious critical light (Lindberg et al. 2010). It was, in fact, a fanzine that would turn into the first professional American music magazine. *Crawdaddy!* was founded in

1966 by Paul Williams, who studied rock magazines in the U.K. in order to differentiate between what he felt was true music criticism and the music trade magazines, which he saw as being simply glorified advertising geared at teenagers. Lindberg et al. claim that, with the launch of *Crawdaddy!*, “Williams announces a new era of ‘criticism’ freed from ‘teenage-magazine perspectives,’ pin-ups as well as music industry briefs” and ushers in a new era of “intelligent” writing on rock (2010, p. 74).

It’s important to note that the then 17-year old Williams was very much a part of the rock community on which he sought to turn a serious critical eye (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 106). He viewed rock as the authentic experience of life; in *Crawdaddy!*, he was determined to solidify the sense of community that he and his fellow youth so desperately longed for (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 75). Though much of his early criticism tended towards enthusiastic record reviews of what he considered “serious” music, Williams “represents a shift from (pop star) *admiration* to a new quest for (rock) meaning as a social experience” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 108).

Reflecting the experiential nature of participating in rock culture, Williams integrated the communal experience of listening to music into his assessments of it. In the second issue of *Crawdaddy!*, a review of Slim Harpo’s “Baby Scratch My Back” includes a line that seems to invite Williams’ readers into his own personal listening experience. Writes Williams, “The harp is extremely expressive, like he’s playing it straight and telling us what he means at the same time” (Williams 2002, p. 19).

In resisting the critical interpretation of rock music in favor of waxing poetic on the personal experience of listening to it, William set the precedent for a new form of criticism that was stylized towards “individual subjectivity” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 112). Lindberg et al. argue that Williams’s aim of rock “sharing his experience” was deliberate, benefiting both

audience and rock criticism itself: he implies that the personal experience of a critic's readership is as important as the critic's own experience, and thus, not only is listening to music a participatory experience but criticism of it is as well. For rock criticism to be successful, it had to be "one of us" who generated it. Thus, the new form of criticism recognized the genre's potential for freeing youth from the alienation produced through 1960s suburban life.

Where Williams's attempts at criticism were more fan-based, Richard Goldstein was the first rock critic with a journalism education to secure a column in an already established professional newspaper, the *Village Voice*. Taking narrative cues from Tom Wolfe and fiction writers like Norman Mailer, Goldstein's style was characterized by elaborate uses of metaphor and third-person perspective, as opposed to Williams' first person subjectivity (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 114-115). Still, according to Lindberg et al., "Like Williams, Goldstein was on an optimistic rock trip; a trip where the music is viewed as an incarnation of collective feelings, of participation and possibly, revolution" (2005, p.116). In a 1967 review of Leonard Cohen, Goldstein writes "He suffers gloriously in every couplet. Even his moments of ecstasy seem predicated on hours of refined despair. Leonard does not rant; he whispers hell and you must strain to hear his agony" (Goldstein 1970, p. 22).

Also turning away from subjective experience was a form of rock criticism that saw in rock music a revolutionary bent. This was perhaps most easily seen in *Rolling Stone*, which launched in 1967 with the mantra "the magic that can set you free" (Frith 2007, p. 36.) Though it was still considered alternative press, *RS* was the first music magazine to combine, in Frith's words, "the anarchy of the underground papers with professionalism and dedication to rock" (Frith 2007, p. 160). Different in style and tone from *Crawdaddy!*, *RS* was to become *the* authoritative voice on rock criticism that it tends to be today, due in part to its establishment of a

clear style, “professional” editorial layout, and emphasis on unbiased reviews which were bold enough to occasionally be negative.

One of the main players at *RS*, Jon Landau, is considered to be instrumental in developing the style of the rock review, which Lindberg et al. situate as the “building block to criticism.” Though by nature, reviewing is never completely objective, in other professionalized forms of art criticism the critic was “expected to *describe, classify* and *interpret* the object, and...substantiate (his) judgment with reasonable *arguments*” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 13). Where previous music critics focused primarily on their experience with rock music rather than their knowledge of it on an aesthetic level, Landau, a former music producer, introduced evaluations of music’s technical proficiency into record reviewing. In doing so, he forced rock critics to be not just fans but have some knowledge of musicology, production styles and the music industry. Lindberg et al. present an example in Landau’s review of *Between the Buttons* by the Rolling Stones: “The dry, un- or lightly echoed thing he [producer Oldham] is working with Watts gives the overall sound tremendous bite” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 142). While the experience of listening was still crucial to rock criticism, Landau’s confidence in evaluating production values and musical proficiency as “good” or “bad” while still maintaining that his opinions were based in subjective experience gave him “the authority of a judge” in reviewing records, a technique that scholars argue “raised the bar” for rock reviewing (2005, p. 143).

But *Rolling Stone* also pioneered a new form of highly subjective reporting by including long-form feature articles on rock musicians that borrowed from literary techniques. Borrowing from “The New Journalism” technique of “fictionalizing of reporting,” Lindberg et al. characterize the style as how “something is made an event by the journalists’ intervention” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 64). Characterized by “scene by scene construction, third person point

of view, recording of everyday detail and the inclusion of the persona of the journalist within the text,” New Journalism imbued rock criticism with a clear literary style that was considered to have its own artistic merit—a development significant to the legitimization of both rock music and rock criticism (Shepherd 2003, p. 254).

The expansion of legitimate forms of rock criticism did not end there. *Creem Magazine’s* Lester Bangs, one of rock criticism’s biggest heroes, added yet another dimension to this form of writing in which the style was “based on the sound and the language” and “express(ed) the uncontrollable spirit of rock” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 175-177). Inspired by Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism, Bangs took on a “sexually frustrated and fucked up” and decidedly adolescent persona that was only saved by rock music. In a long rant on the Stooges that appeared in *Creem* magazine, Bangs describes the band as playing “sickening songs about TV eyes and feeling like dirt and not having no fun ‘cause you’re a fucked up adolescent, horny but neurotic, sitting around bored and lonesome...” (Bangs 1988, p. 32).

Despite the variety, within the various music magazines that were founded in the mid-1960s, a clear, general distinction was emerging between subjective and objective styles of rock criticism—although both gained legitimacy. On the one hand were critics who wrote about what they liked, who Lindberg et al. suggest were “fans and pedagogues rather than arbiters of taste” (2005, p. 12). They argue that this sort of fan-criticism was characterized by “impressionist subjectivity” that was highly personalized and “relies on suggestion, association and a more or less literary style” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 13). The “committed objective” critic, on the other hand, “bother(s) to make the object tangible to people other than themselves, even if they have different audiences in mind and will contextualize it in different ways” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 14).

As Jones summarizes regarding the emergence of such a distinction, both forms “stretched journalistic conventions...in ways that foregrounded meaning making as opposed to aesthetics” (Jones 2002, p. 38). This was, in part, a function of rock music itself, which had become representative of the hippie movement—and, like folk music before it, for the most part had more-or-less clear ideological and political aims. Indeed, the political climate of the 1960s heavily influenced critics’ treatment of rock, as the “lyrical content of popular music itself forced critics to confront social issues” and “to explore the ways in which meaning is made from popular music” (Jones 2002, p. 21). Establishing a critical framework in which to discuss rock was essential to explore that meaning-making, because once rock music was legitimized, “there was also a commitment to treating popular culture as worthy of serious analysis, an approach that has continued to be influential” (Shuker 2008, p. 170).

The elaboration of forms of criticism in the context of rock perpetuated ideas about critics and criticism that remain important today. Jones argues that it was the combination of the prominence of the early critics of *Rolling Stone* and the stylistic conventions they forged in that “has structured mainstream critics’ style” ever since (Jones 2002, p. 20). It was these early critics who inaugurated a tradition of “maintaining a critical distance from the music companies” by “constructing a sense of community” with their readers (Shuker 2008, p. 171).

That ideology—or the “Myth of Rock” as Lindberg et al. dub it—has remained for the most part intact, despite the growing entanglement of the music press with the major music industries. Rooted in the ideal that rock music had some emancipatory power, the mythology created by early rock critics was not only essential to the tradition that rock criticism would become—but in many ways closely echoed those of its predecessor: the modern critic.

Echoes of Enlightenment

What connects the elaboration of rock criticism with earlier criticism from the Enlightenment Era is the idea that discourse on culture was the way to freedom. Interestingly, however, comparing the emergence of the rock critic with the early modern critic of Enlightenment era also makes clear a key difference. It is not the criticism of art that creates the discourse essential to political liberation—but the art itself. In the 1960s, the shared experience of participating in rock music was used as discourse in a mass mediated world characterized by passive consumption. Its criticism—and its legitimization as an artistic form—came later.

While in the Enlightenment Era culture, discourse and education on high culture was as a precursor for political action, in the 1960s, it was the appropriation of working-class culture by a more affluent class that was to inspire revolutionary ideals. In some sense, it would seem that, for youth, this came out of a need to engage in a certain type of struggle in a time in which concerns about the Vietnam War reached a fever pitch. Without the hegemony of rationalized society in the 1960s, there would be no need to fantasize about the “dangers” of a working class life—nor a concrete precedent for rebellion. Where prior to the Enlightenment Era, the struggle against an oppressive government represented real class struggle, in the 1960s, the *play* of class struggle was just as effective in empowering people towards political action.

In both Enlightenment criticism and rock criticism, culture in very different ways serves an essential role in solidifying a community that is able to engage in such political action. However, because of marked differences in the respective political circumstances, criticism *itself* functions in very different ways. If the critic of the Enlightenment Era emerged out of resistance to tyranny, the rock critic emerged in a period of resistance to the “tyranny” of rationality and institutionalization—or, to radicalize those terms, to the boredom of middle class life.

Despite a similar aim, the key difference as far as criticism is concerned is that, though there may have been a fear of the authoritarianism of mass culture in the 1960s, fears about an authoritarian government weren't nearly as pervasive, in part (at least before the late 1960s) because of capitalism and democratic systems of government. Where a major problem for the Enlightenment critic was the authority that he inherently wielded (authority being the precursor to tyranny), for the rock critic, authority was a way to achieve critical agency, to elevate the rock critic to a position in which rock music could be legitimized as an art form. Though in early fan magazines, there may have been a sense that the critic was "one of us," the need to establish rock music's value led to the "professionalization" of the field—one in which its participants were expected to have knowledge beyond that of the public.

As evidenced by the critical excerpts above from Bangs, Williams and Landau, the style of rock writing may have been more reflective of Eagleton's "proletariat hack." However, the fact that rock music itself was so bound up in community-building has potentially created a fourth critical identity which mixes the "moderator" function of the man of letters with the ego-centric literary form of the hack. The melding of the two may be explained by the fact that rock critics are not as concerned with aesthetics as modern critics were, and therefore have less of a pedagogic function. The emphasis on the listening experience, subjective interpretation, and community building that early rock critics canonized may be responsible, at least in part, for the current crisis for the music press. The following chapters will demonstrate this development, first by contextualizing the "death of the rock critic," and then suggesting how the critical model forged by rock critics in the sixties heralded both the death and rebirth of rock criticism as a practice.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROCK CRITIC AND THE WEB

In the decades after the rock critic emerged, his role became solidified into post-1960s culture as a primary moderator of the discourse on rock music (Frith 2007). Popular music criticism (much of it on rock music) was the primary subject for major music magazines like *Rolling Stone* and was featured prominently in newspapers and localized arts magazines. For music fans, professional rock critics functioned “as significant gatekeepers and arbiters of taste” who were able to preview new music and interpret it for potential consumers (Shuker 2008, p. 161).

However, the rampant development of new technologies in the late 20th century would lead to a sea change in social and cultural life on a global scale, and would once again challenge criticism. Like in previous periods where new forms of criticism emerged, it was a drastic shift in the modes of production that would remake society, and subsequently, art and its surrounding discourse.

Where mainstream music magazines flourished in the decades after rock emerged, by the mid-2000s, a number of established music magazines were either struggling financially or ceasing publication all together. By the mid-2000s venerated music magazines including *No Depression*, *Blender*, *Tape Ops*, and *Vibe* had all gone out of business, while two other major titles, *Rolling Stone* and *Blender*, were “experiencing double-digit declines in advertising” (Kot, 2009, p. 122). Along with them, “rock critic” was a profession that was quickly dying.

Ironically, the supposed death of the rock critic did little to kill the cultural discourse on music, which was rapidly shifting to online forums. According to McLeese,

In the age of the Internet, more people are listening to more music than ever before. More people are writing about music than ever before. More people are reading about music than ever before (McLeese 2010, p. 444).

The fact that rock criticism exists in any form attests to the importance of music to culture. So why then, would music journalists be lamenting the death of the rock critic?

This chapter will seek to contextualize the rock critic's "demise" in the digital age by first examining the broad cultural changes that the Internet precipitated and then narrowing the focus to the shake-up it caused for the music industry—and in turn, the music press. A few scholars, McLeese, Kot and Jones in particular, have studied how the business models of both the music industry and the music press failed to meet the challenges of the digital age; a brief literature review will attempt to synthesize those authors' claims. However, much of the hysteria about the "death of the critic" is arguably about the professional model of music journalism that evolved on the pages of print music magazines like *Rolling Stone*. The final section of this chapter will explore alternative models of rock criticism that are emerging online—as well as more moderated forms of user-generated content on consumer and mass media sites. It is in the juxtaposition of traditional forms of rock criticism and the critical practice taking place online that the following and final chapter will posit that rock criticism is more reflective of the discursive practice of the Enlightenment Era.

Convergence Culture

The development of the Internet allowed information to be “computerized”—and hence allowed for an unprecedented ability for people to share information and to respond to it (Kirby 2009). Where early versions of the Internet were relatively static and “information only,” interactive web platforms that became known under the banner of Web 2.0 allowed users to participate in the creation of online texts (Kirby 2009, p.101). New interactive technology also ingrained the Internet with a social component by allowing users to “generate and distribute content, often with freedom to share and re-use” (Kot 2009, p. 101).

A relatively rapid advancement of Internet technologies would precipitate a “fundamental shift in the way people were able to communicate” (Kirby 2009, p. 101). In the period of less than a decade, much that had previously governed the cultural, industrial and economic structures of society were to be challenged by the ability to instantly spread information, not only on a global level but on an unprecedented scale. Where even the reach of the traditional mass media had been limited by geographic constraints, the Internet allowed for unlimited virtual audiences whose only limitations were in their ability to jump on the web.

While the Internet certainly had profound effects on every facet of the way people conduct their lives, it could be argued that the most significant way the Internet impacted society in the early 21st century was that it created a nearly infinite digital public sphere. User-generated content sites like blogs, Wikipedia and YouTube, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have exploded in popularity for a new generation raised with laptops and improving web connectivity. However, while a new digital community being forged online offered infinite possibility for social life, the Internet was to present difficult challenges to certain forms of commerce.

Businesses that depended on the printing press were hit particularly hard by the shift towards online culture and information sharing, as their primary product was printed information—information that was now potentially “virtual and downloadable” (McLeese 2010, p. 434). News organizations competing with the accessibility of the Internet were faced with a myriad of problems, such as soaring print costs, loss of advertising revenue, and an inability to keep up with the immediacy web publishing, just to name a few.

But the problem for music magazines and for rock critics was compounded by the profound changes in the very industry that it addressed. Though the music industry doesn’t sell “information” in the strictest sense, new technologies allowed for music to be digitized and shared much in the same way as information. As a result, the music industry also saw a major shake-up in the digital age, one that has entirely changed the way that people find, purchase and consume music, and the way artists produce it. The following section uses what little scholarship exists to date on the simultaneous collapse of the music industry and music press to illustrate the role the Internet played in “killing” the critic.

Spiraling Industries

According to McLeese, the crisis for music magazines wasn’t based on a loss of the impulse towards rock criticism, but on how the business models in both the music and print industries failed to meet the challenges of the digital age (2010, p. 446). Where the rock music industry started out as a series of small labels and “mom and pop” record stores, by the 1990s it had become a huge corporate conglomerate that relied on chain retail stores to generate billions annually (McLeese 2010). Over the decades since rock music emerged, the music industry and the music press had become increasingly intertwined, perhaps to their detriment (Lindberg et al.

2005). Jones calls the relationship between them “symbiotic”: music magazines acted almost as a promotion arm for major labels, who relied on rock critics to generate publicity for their acts (2002).

As Kot argues, the crisis in the music industry began with the invention of the CD-R, in that “a new generation of bands and fans empowered by personal laptops and broadband Internet connections” could circumvent buying pre-recorded CDs by ripping them onto computer hard drives and then sharing them online (Kot 2009, p. 3). Even more devastating to the music industry was the development of record peer-to-peer music sharing sites, which discounted one of the main services that record labels provided, that of retail distribution. In 1999, Napster became a huge threat to the music industry, which relied on billions of dollars generated through CD sales. Not only could audiences circumvent paying for new albums, but the shift to digitized music made possible the development of personalized digital-music players in the late 1990s, threatening to make the CD—the primary “product” of the music industry—obsolete (Kot 2009).

Rather than embracing the new technology offered by the web, record companies instead called the practice of sharing music “piracy” and “treated their customers as criminals, refusing to exploit the promotional possibilities of free exposure” (McLeese 2010, p. 442). As McLeese argues, their major resistance to compromising with audiences was the fact that “what the customers wanted was what the labels were reluctant to sell: the one or two good tracks on a CD” (p. 442). Concerned about the loss of revenue generated by CDs, the record industry engaged in fierce legal battles with music sharing sites, to no avail. The practice of CD burning rose rapidly, and prerecorded CD sales declined just as quickly. In 2003, an agreement with Apple to develop iTunes attempted a compromise: record companies would offer individual

tracks for 99 cents, but “for the labels, this revenue did not begin to offset the profits lost on CDs” (McLeese 2010, p. 443). Music industry profits continued to spiral downward.

However, as Kot argues, despite the crisis in the major record label industry, there was also an unprecedented ability in the digital era for new artists to be heard. Until the explosion of digital publishing, the music industry generated billions in profits annually and dominated music consumption by providing artists with three primary incentives: distribution to retailers, subsidized studio costs, and promotion and publicity campaigns (McLeese 2010, p. 446). A combination of advancing recording technology and Internet publishing platforms devalued those services. Social networking sites, MySpace in particular, encouraged bands to upload what were primarily low-budget or homemade recordings. Now, music could not only be shared online but it could also be published online, which threatened to allow bands to circumvent the major label system all together.

Self-promotion was also integral to social networking sites. Jenkins describes how advancements in media technology ushered in a new era of convergence culture, in which “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins 2006, p. 2). In a challenge to the promotion and publicity major labels offered, a readily available fan audience online was proving to be a formidable marketing tool, often more successful for bands than even professional promotion campaigns. Central to the success of bands distributing and marketing music online was the philosophy at the heart of social networking: peer sharing. Not only were bands able to distribute and promote their work online, but the growing emphasis on participatory culture that Jenkins describes enabled the public (in this case “fans”) to substitute as an unpaid marketing force. By sharing music,

“consumers morphed into de facto music programmers who shared information and music via message boards, Web pages, e-zines and Mp3 blogs” (Kot 2009, p. 2).

A host of attendant changes happened to practices of promotion. McLeese argues that artists could potentially generate a bigger fanbase online than they would relying on the major label system (McLeese 2010, p. 443). Even if the catch was that they released music for free, the buzz generated by online promotion attracted people to their performances, which generated substitute revenue (McLeese 2010, p. 444). Kot goes so far as to describes this shift towards participatory music culture as a “new grassroots music industry, with the fans and bands rather than corporations in charge” (2009, back cover). Bands were now able to be “self contained media businesses” while fans became “distributors or even collaborators” (Kot 2009, p. 58). Where the music industry had used mass media to market their artists to passive consumers, now they were relegated to following the “buzz” generated by those same consumers to find new artists. And many major labels were finding that the new “grassroots” model for the industry was making them increasingly irrelevant.

As a result of the repositioning of fans, bands, and music companies, music magazines that had so heavily relied on the major label system also began to struggle initially because of their financial ties with the music industry. Until the Internet age, record label advertising was a primary source of income for music magazines. As the music industry floundered, music magazines lost a major stream of revenue. Furthermore, even when newspapers and magazines did make try to make jump online, in doing so they made one crucial mistake: they didn’t charge for content (McLeese 2010, p. 441). As the other significant portion of revenue for newspapers and magazines was subscriptions, making content available for free online led to an obvious decline in subscription rates (McLeese 2010, p. 441). Publishers took the risk believing that they

could reach a wider audience online than in print and rely on web advertising instead of subscriptions (McLeese 2010, p. 442). However, “web advertising was devalued from the start” because it avoided print costs. (McLeese 2010, p. 442). Thus, between the loss of subscriptions and advertising dollars, publishing costs were often overwhelming. Though some music magazines attempted shifts to online webzines, the printed music magazine was quickly becoming an endangered species.

The fact that new music is often instantly available online with a point-and-click immediately challenges the relevance of rock critics. Prior to the move towards digital music promotion and distribution, a primary function of the rock critic had been to help consumers determine whether or not a record was worth its purchase price. Rock critics were able to hear new albums before the public, translate the act of listening to them into descriptive reviews, and “rate” them accordingly.

What made the critic’s function as an arbiter of taste less necessary in the digitization of the music industry was the ability of artists to publish their music online, create a buzz, and allow consumers to instantly purchase that music online as well. According to McLeese, while the Internet was perhaps “liberating for professional musicians,” it “could well mean a career end for professional music journalists” (2010, p. 436).

The key word here is “*professional*,” as what most scholars who have studied the “death of the rock critic” speak specifically of paid journalists who work for established news organizations. Clearly, the effects of the Internet devastated the mainstream music press. However, McLeese points out that a continuing dialogue about music online persisted despite the fact that many “professional” rock critics were finding themselves out of a job. In sum, the

proliferation of rock criticism online led to hard questions about the relevance of professional rock critics to an increasingly DIY generation (2010).

In order to explore the value of various forms of criticism being forged online, the following sections will attempt to differentiate between alternative rock journalism, the mediated consumer “criticism” on sites like Amazon and the more response-based forms of criticism that social networking and convergence culture encourage—and the how these new forms were adapted by the mainstream music press.

A New Model Emerges

While print music magazines struggled to survive, an explosion of various forms of Internet-driven criticism made it evident that rock criticism was still relevant even if the professional rock critic was not. From online fanzines to music blogs to the development of “customer review” sections on consumer sites like Amazon, by the late 2000s, rock criticism was clearly being remade online. However, of these new forms of online criticism, few resembled the more institutionalized form of criticism that had long reigned in printed music magazines. Where traditional rock critics were expected to have some expertise in rock music, online music criticism was to take even more of a subjective turn than it had seen before.

As Kot argues, “The Internet instantly gave anyone with a desire to write passionately and persuasively about indie rock a potential audience of millions, at virtually no cost” (2009, p. 117). As argued in previous chapters, the cultural discourse on rock was forged in underground press in the 1960s before the music press—and the music industry—had become more commercialized. As the music press became more and more mainstream, underground fanzines continued to be generated. However, the high cost of publishing and distribution limited fanzines

by limiting their audiences. But the Internet was about to change all of that. Like musicians had already done, fanzine authors also quickly realized the publishing potential that the Internet offered and began to establish “webzines” in response.

Though several music webzines were to crop up in the 2000s, one stood out, and presented what would become a significant threat to the mainstream music press. *Pitchfork*, launched in 1999 by Ryan Shreibner, was the first fanzine to be published exclusively online. Like printed fanzines (a form of alternative journalism), the webzine was first aimed at the most rabid of music fans and focused on smaller independent acts that the mainstream music press failed to follow (Atton and Hamilton 2008). Schreibner, who had no professional experience as a music critic besides what he called an unhealthy obsession with music, used a ten-point rating scale for reviews (as opposed to *Rolling Stone*’s five-star rating), and wrote in a uniquely subjective style, which he says gravitated towards “pranksterism and snarkiness” (as quoted in Kot 2010, p. 118).

However, despite the “unprofessional” nature of its coverage, *Pitchfork* was to serve a function beyond its content. The online zine quickly began to appeal to the “laptop generation,” who had become accustomed to the point-and-click immediacy that the Internet allowed. While in the standard cycle of print magazines, a record review may not have been published until months after its release, *Pitchfork* was able to instantly publish reviews and music news—even provide streaming preview tracks of new releases.

Clearly, for a younger generation, immediacy trumped “professionalism”: In 1999, a colorful 1200-word rant and a 10-point rating of major label act Radiohead’s *Kid A* sparked nearly 5,000 hits to the site in one day (Kot 2009, p. 117). Reviewer Brent DiCrescenzo bordered on being incomprehensible by claiming that listening to the record was “like witnessing the

stillborn birth of a child while simultaneously having the opportunity to see her play in the afterlife on Imax” (DiCrescenzo, through Kot 2010, p. 119). Even considering the oddity of the review, the fact that *Rolling Stone’s* review wasn’t published until weeks later made the magazine look slow-on-the-uptake in contrast (McLeese 2010). Despite the fact that review seemed to break every stylistic rule of rock criticism, it set the stage for *Pitchfork* to become a leading “critical” voice for the digital age (Kot 2009, p. 117).

In addition to benefiting from immediacy, *Pitchfork’s* focus on independent acts also indicated a failure of the music press to incorporate the growing self-awareness generated by social media and a technology-driven DIY culture. While the mainstream music press remained tied to the major label industry and therefore bound to cover primarily “mainstream” acts, *Pitchfork* capitalized on a growing interest in the wealth of “indie” acts emerging online and publishing through sites like MySpace. Music fans could now troll for up-and-coming acts online and share links to favorite artists with their friends. Rather than working within the “top down” model of the mainstream music press, *Pitchfork* also kept its ear to the ground by monitoring new indie acts who were publishing online and covering them with the same seriousness that they did major label acts. As a result, artists who may have taken years to generate any attention from labels or the mainstream music press were quickly put in the spotlight (Kot 2009).

Though professional critics were quick to denigrate *Pitchfork* as only a fanzine, and therefore not representative of true criticism, the site’s “fanzine” style of coverage may have been appealing to a new generation who were encouraged by social media sites to actively seek out and share new artists. *Pitchfork’s* quirky über-subjectivity distanced it from the mainstream music press. For a generation who erected monuments to themselves on Facebook, *Pitchfork’s* writers were “one of us.”

It could be argued that *Pitchfork* not only filled the gaps in the mainstream media, but was actually so much more aware of the needs of digital-age audiences that it forced the mainstream music press to follow its lead. Clearly, what was important to music fans was changing. As Kot argues, though there was still value in the “levelheaded professionalism, erudite writing, and historical context” that music magazines offered, they couldn’t compete with the “timeliness and convenience” that the Internet afforded (Kot 2009, p. 120).

While music magazines failed, “by 2005, *Pitchfork* was drawing 120,000 daily readers who came to inspect the site’s comprehensive coverage of all things indie rock” (Kot 2009, p.112). Kot claims that, by 2007, a good review of an indie artist on *Pitchfork* could immediately make or break an artist. By the late 2000s, the site had become major taste-maker, with its reputation among music fans nearly that of the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone* (Kot 2009, p. 123).

In addition to *Pitchfork*, the creation of personal blogs revealed an impulse towards individualized forms of “alternative journalism” being forged online. While *Pitchfork* worked more like traditional music magazines by using freelance writers, individual blogs allowed passionate music fans to published online “diaries” touting their personal tastes—and conceivably to build a personal following. In 2008, music blog aggregator The Hype Machine listed at least “eighteen hundred blogs” specifically devoted to music, many of which, one would assume, were run by unpaid fans rather than professional music journalists (Kot 2009, p. 123). The explosion of personalized music blogs may have had a legitimizing function for *Pitchfork*. Blogs became the new “fanzines” while *Pitchfork*, which had doubled its writing staff by 2007 and had a clear editorial focus, was evidence of how rock criticism could be “professionalized” in a way that met the desires of digital audiences. However, other forms of

criticism were also being forged online that were indicative of the way in which critical practice, even if it was “unprofessional,” was becoming the hallmark of the digital public sphere.

Despite the large numbers of music blogs that sprang up online, not every music fan had the time or the conviction to produce such extensive coverage; however, it was clear that user interactivity was compelling for web audiences. In what was a hybrid of citizen criticism and fan response, many online retail outlets, notably Amazon.com and iTunes, began to incorporate user reviews and rating systems into their formats, encouraging both journalistic-style reviews by their consumers and allowing users to add their own star ratings. Major music magazines have followed suit online: Rolling Stone.com has created a similar portal for user-generated criticism by featuring an “add a review” button below official writer reviews and Spin.com similarly includes a “write a review” link alongside its professional record reviews.

According to Atton and Hamilton, rather than representing “alternative journalism” the way that *Pitchfork* and blogs do, criticism on consumer and mainstream media sites instead are a form of “participatory cultural production [...] where opinions, experiences and tastes are instances and extensions of everyday life rather than expressions of engagement in political life and the public sphere” (Atton and Hamilton 2008, p. 81). It is only when members of the public are knowingly and deliberately creating media that the practice can be considered alternative journalism (Atton and Hamilton 2008). However, more and more websites seem to be blurring that line by situating user reviews directly alongside reviews from professional critics at mainstream media organizations.

Perhaps more representative of purely participatory forms of culture (which make no claims at being journalism) are the interactive features on social networking sites that encourage a sort of passive criticism. Facebook eventually incorporated “like” and “share” buttons onto its

own site and, in a development exemplary of convergence culture, websites across a multitude of genres now allow users to log in through sites like Twitter and Facebook and to share stories and audiovisual content directly from buttons imbedded in their pages. The majority of major music magazines websites now allow users to rate records alongside professional critics' ratings, with user ratings then aggregated with other customer reviews.

Though sharing media or simply "liking" or rating it online is certainly a long way from what we think of as true criticism, one thing is clear: whether it is a blog, a customer review or simply a tweet, in the digital age people have an unprecedented ability to express their own opinions—and to be heard. However, where many scholars are eager to discount participatory digital culture as not representing true critical practice, in fact, the way that digital culture encourages criticism has in some ways made the possibilities for criticism endless. No matter how a user chooses to engage, the Internet has, if nothing else, encouraged the critical faculty—even in people who are otherwise not inclined to produce criticism.

As the following chapter will argue, the ways the Internet has increased user agency and encouraged criticism may be largely to blame in the supposed demise of the professional rock critic. However, online space for criticism has also potentially ushered in a new era of discursive rock criticism that reflects Enlightenment-era ideals.

CHAPTER 4

ROCK CRITICISM AS DISCOURSE

While scholars and journalists continue to lament the death of the critic, little academic study has been done on how rock criticism is being remade in the digital age to better meet the desires of a generation with access to an unprecedented public sphere. As evidenced by blogs, user-reviews, convergence culture and online zines like *Pitchfork*, the Internet has tremendously opened up the *practice* of rock criticism, which, as in the Enlightenment Era, is an occurrence that may have value in and of itself. Perhaps the re-making of rock criticism online, in fact, is evidence of a return to more discursive forms of criticism.

Prior to the Internet, technological constraints and the consolidation of major media industries limited the ability for the public to actively engage in criticism. However, in the digital era, the ability for artists and “citizen critics” to self-publish, coupled with convergence culture and communal media production, has prompted hard questions about whether audiences really need an “informed” intermediary—in this case a professional rock critic—to guide them to forms of culture to consume.

Rock critics have been challenged further by both the availability of music online and the subjective nature of listening to it. Digital technology and culture not only allows musicians to self-publish, but audiences are encouraged to seek out new music online and to voice individual opinions. In the digital age, anyone with a laptop, an Internet connection and an opinion has the

ability to become a critic—and to be heard. As evidenced by increasingly limited paid criticism positions, it would seem that the age of the professional rock critic, who presumably had some expertise and training in the journalism field, may be coming to an end. Perhaps the threat, however, is not towards the impulse towards criticism but, rather, to the kind of “expert critic” who has been the standard in the press only in the decades since rock music emerged.

What is being lost along with professional rock critics? Does the public continue to need arbiters of taste in the digital age? What is the value of new rock criticism being generated online?

Though some scholars have speculated on how professional rock critics may have failed to meet the needs of a digital generation, few have acknowledged that, perhaps, the “arbiter of taste” model may be entirely outdated for rock criticism in the Internet age. In presenting both an examination of both modern criticism and rock music, this study has attempted to historicize the current problem for rock criticism in a way that might establish a more positive framework through which to view how it is being remade online. If the emergence of the rock critic is any indication, cultural authority is often necessary in legitimizing new art practices. The return to a discursive form of rock criticism in the digital age may be evidence that criticism is a fluid practice that cyclically prompts cultural authority and then tears it down for new generations and forms to materialize.

This chapter will first present a holistic argument as to why the professional rock critic and the mainstream music press may not have fulfilled the needs of a newly formed digital society. It will then posit online rock criticism as a discursive practice that may have some liberating value to society—championing a form of criticism that was arguably never realized in the Enlightenment Era.

The Death of the Rock Critic

Though the Internet had a profound impact on professional rock criticism, to blame the web entirely would be to ignore fundamental questions about the need for professional tastemakers in a society that seems to once again be rejecting mass cultural production in favor of “indie media” and user-generated content. As described in the previous chapter, the music press was initially challenged because it was an industry economically tied to the failing major label system. But the question as to why professional criticism suffered in the digital age is more complex than the economic crisis that the Internet created for the mainstream music press. The issue is more in the widespread cultural changes that the Internet has generated—changes that the mainstream press may have failed to respond to.

Ironically, it may be the fact that rock criticism became a legitimate literary field that ultimately challenges it as a profession. If the modern critic emerged out of a collective resistance to authoritarianism, in the decades after rock criticism emerged, the commercialization and consolidation of the music industry and the music press created an acceptable cultural authoritarianism that was mediated by rock critics. Lindberg et al. argue that in the decades prior to the Internet, that authoritarianism served to legitimize rock music as a genre, interpret new music, and direct consumers to “authentic” artists who seemed to exemplify the “myth of rock.” In turn, that myth in some ways shielded rock fans from the fact that critics were, at base, arbiters of taste for consumers.

In the digital age, the rock critic who dominated magazines like *Rolling Stone* faces challenges to every one of his roles. Internet publishing is an affront to critics’ authority, and new technology makes music instantly available to the public—calling into question the need for arbiters of taste. Furthermore the “myth of rock” is increasingly irrelevant to younger generations

who have seen the music industry become tremendously homogenized and more geared toward commercialism than building community and enabling social revolution.

The revolutionary claims made by rock criticism could not live up to the exclusionary social organization of its practice. As soon as rock criticism became a product capable of generating revenue, certain limitations were put on who was able to practice it. Nor could its conventional status live up to its claims of liberation. Like other forms of journalism, rock critics were expected to follow certain rules of practice. According to Lindberg et al. , “Because (s)he takes part in a public discussion, the critic, in contradistinction to the layman, is obliged to express his/her subjective experience in words, address an absent audience and observe the rules of the genre chosen” (2005, p. 13).

The combination of necessary training, a clear (and arguably difficult) literary style, and a limited number of available positions narrowed the ability to generate criticism to a relatively small body of rock critics who were given access to new music before the public, thereby becoming privileged “gatekeepers” who directed consumers. As argued in prior chapters, the institutionalization of “rock critic” as a profession in the 1960s made rock music—and in some ways popular culture as a whole—worthy of serious examination. However, in doing so, it also dissolved some of the critical agency of the public—which the Internet has been slowly restoring.

The fact that “rock critic” was becoming an increasingly outdated stereotype further devalued the field’s authority. Since the 1960s, the rock critic has arguably had the same identity: a white, middle-class male who Weingarten defines as the “gilded geekazoid sitting in this ivory tower [...] tossing down opinions” (Weingarten 2009). Accordingly, the stereotypical

rock critic reflected the primary consumers of music magazines, who Shuker describes as an “aging, affluent, largely white male readership” (2008, p. 167).

Despite the fact that rock itself may remain potentially a liberating force, the implication one must draw is that the rock critic may be as dangerous to the rock audience as are the mass-mediated circumstances in which the critic exists. The critic-as-arbiter-of-taste inscribes particular types of music with value and thereby regulates what is bought—and, more importantly, which ideologies are propagated. Prior to advances in Internet technology, mass production made it nearly impossible to seek out new music to experience: audiences often didn’t hear a record until after purchasing it. What seemed like serious business to Weingarten’s “gilded geekazoid,” helping audiences choose which records to purchase, in essence had a narrowing effect on what types of culture were not only consumed, but also produced.

For a generation who grew up with consolidated chain retail stores, Top 40 radio, *Rolling Stone* and MTV directing youth towards which music to consume, some of the relevance of rock music itself had been lost, and thus, the relevance of the professional critic as well. As Shuker argues, “the ideological role of the music press in constructing a sense of community and in maintaining a critical distance from the music companies had already become muted by the late 1980s” (2008, p.169). Other scholars argue as well that, by the late 20th century, youth were turning away from the “rock myth,” which refers to its promise to initiate cultural revolution. As the music industry and the music press became increasingly commercialized and intertwined, critics’ attempts at “meaning-making” shifted to more of a “consumer guide” approach in major music magazines, which seemed to promote passive consumption by audiences. Yet this is far from a uniform trend. Shuker argues that “the music press plays a major part in the process of selling music as an economic commodity, while at the same time investing it with cultural

significance” (2008, p.161). However, that cultural significance had been “transformed into a symbolic cultural promise, which ensured the longevity of the rock discourse beyond the counterculture context” (Lindberg et al. 2005, p. 330).

The larger point to make is, unlike other forms of art criticism, rock criticism came to prioritize subjective meaning-making over objective aesthetics, which encouraged experiential assessments and further solidified the subjectivity of music listening. As rock criticism emerged as a clear genre with its own literary form, professional critics may have been considered experts as much for their ability to translate the experience of listening into words as for their knowledge of rock music. However, according to Atton, by the 1990s, rock journalism as a profession became rationalized to the point that it was increasingly homogenized in literary form and style (Atton 2009). Furthermore, as McLeese argues, by sticking with traditional models for criticism, professional critics failed to adapt to digital audiences. Rather than attempting to meet the desires of a younger generation, critics continued to cater to an older audience by reviewing full records despite a trend towards single-track downloads online (McLeese 2010). Furthermore, in sticking with New Journalism style, critics failed to appeal to a generation who preferred instant information to the thorough research and time it took to write and publish long-form features.

Social criticism of rock critics also points to the contradiction between critics and the reevaluation of rock music. Interestingly, the dissolution of a “high” vs. “low” mentality may have been one result of the legitimization of rock music, and simultaneously the death knell for professional rock critics. When modern criticism emerged, one of its essential functions was invite a new middle class into the discourse on “high art” and thereby shrink class divides. In order to participate in the dialogue, members of the public had to become informed on aesthetic standards of taste and be able to differentiate between the “high art” of the aristocracy and the

folk art of the common people. When popular culture became worthy of serious critical discourse, much of the “high/low” distinction was transformed into an “authentic/commercial” dialectic. The development of Internet publishing (both music and text) had devastated the major commercial music industry; as a result, conceivably anything produced on the Internet was more “authentic” than its commercialized counterparts, including criticism.

Though rock criticism may have originated in the subculture of the 1960s, as rock music and the music press became more commercialized, the rock critic became the “arbiter of taste” who, rather than participating with his fellow rock critics in the rock community, was elevated above it. Just as in the Enlightenment Era, he was no longer a “co-subject” sharing in and relegating on the dialogue about rock music from within the public sphere—but a part of the culture industry whose primary function was to direct consumers.

Between professional rock critics’ close ties with consumerism, their failures to adapt quickly for digital audiences and the subjective DIY ethos engrained in rock music itself, professionalized rock criticism faced the perfect storm.

Rock Criticism as Discourse

Lindberg et al. defined rock criticism in the decades before the Internet as a discursive practice; however, the discourse was between critics and the music industry. Without a platform for fan response, the discourse is limited to that between the music creators and critics, in this case major labels and the mainstream music press. In the digital age, the public has been given the ability not only to respond to new music and rock criticism, but to create both. Anyone with web access and a passion for music can create a music blog. Artists can put music directly in the hands of their fans, communicate with them through social networking

sites, and promote themselves and other artists to their own fanbases. Many mainstream music magazines now feature celebrity bloggers on their websites. The Internet has also given musicians tremendous agency over their own publicity and product and a means to success that does not rely on the major label industry.

In fact, a decentralized music industry has led to what can be described as a middle-class musician culture that places more emphasis on new and emerging acts than on major label artists and, in turn, emphasizes the critical practice that finds and elevates certain artists out of the digital melee. Where prior to the Internet, the major label system almost wholly controlled which artists received critical attention, bands and artists now often emerge on MySpace, generate a fanbase, and receive grassroots buzz from fans and bloggers. Professional critics, in turn, now often turn to citizen critics and bloggers to discover artists worthy of coverage or even seek out new acts from within online fan communities. The fact that musicians can now publish online makes rock criticism in particular a uniquely discursive practice, which is perhaps solidified because of the importance of music to identity formation in youth. The myth of rock seems to have been re-energized by indie rock culture in which community is forged in online environments (initially MySpace) where artists have direct access to fans. The ability for youth to seek out new artists online in some ways mimics their parents' discovery of rock music on FM radio. Forging "subcultures" with other likeminded fans has perhaps never been easier during the period of "self cultivation" that often takes place in adolescence.

In the Enlightenment Era, "self cultivation" was essential to participating in the public sphere. Furthermore, participating in the discourse on art served as a stepping stone for participating in politics, which elevated the practice of criticism above the object being criticized. In other words, talking about and understanding art was more important than the

particular artwork itself. In the digital age, the ability for anyone to be a rock critic has in some ways has privileged the rock criticism over rock music as a genre.

Wilde suggested that criticism and creativity are not fundamentally opposing practices, but together a form of discourse that helps to define art, inspire innovation, celebrate beauty and seek truth (even if it is unattainable). He claims that criticism is one of the highest forms of creativity because “it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand” (Wilde 1968, p. 130). For Wilde, an ongoing discourse between artists and critics is essential in the creation of new art forms. Though Wilde took a somewhat elitist view in which only the most intellectual could serve as critics, in crediting the “critical faculty” instead of the critic himself he seems open up the discourse for any member of the public who has a critical instinct. In a step beyond the Enlightenment Era public sphere, the Internet provides an unprecedented “space” for that discourse to take place across countries, language barriers, generations and class distinctions, as well as between artists, fans, critics, major labels, and citizen critics.

Interestingly enough, the literary form of the rock criticism has so far outlived the social position of the professional rock critic. Literary techniques that were pioneered by early rock critics (use of metaphor, New Journalism, star ratings, prioritization of social function over aesthetics) remain remarkably intact even within the customer reviews on Amazon—though perhaps a bit more subjective. A review of Kings of Leon’s *Only by the Night* by Alf R. Bergesen provides a clear example:

I've read Crawl described as "Zepplinesque" but it sounds nothing like a Page/Plant creation. Instead, it calls to mind the Secret Machines' debut's throbbing synth/base loops. It is a propulsive song, chugging along like a runaway

freight train rolling down the tracks at a leisurely 30mph- it doesn't move too fast, but you still can't stop it (Bergesen 2008).

Like rock music itself, it seems that the institutionalization of rock criticism—even if it briefly diminished the critical agency of the public—has created a distinct form that generations of music magazine readers are now reproducing in various online environments. Its institutionalization served a purpose: establishing rock criticism as a distinct field gave the public the tools with which to perpetuate it as a specific literary form. And, as the mainstream press has remade itself online, the ability for fan response establishes a dialogue not just between the music industry and consumers (which is facilitated by journalists) but adds the consumer into the dialogue. And yet, how much of what is taking place on blogs, on social networking sites and online stores like Amazon can be considered actual criticism? It depends on whether or not expertise is fundamental to rock criticism.

What is strangely absent from most studies that speak of the death of rock criticism is the acknowledgement that rock criticism was generated by fans in the first place, not by “experts.” It seems that its institutionalization as a legitimate literary genre has smoothed over the fact that most rock critics, no matter how “professional,” have more of a fan background with music than a scholarly one, lay or otherwise. Furthermore, the fact that rock music was originally examined more for its meaning-making ability than its aesthetics calls into question what a rock critic would really be an expert about, if at least some part of criticism means translating the experience of listening to it. Certainly, practiced rock journalists bring to the table a depth of knowledge of the field, the history and the stylistics of artists and genres.

Where the mainstream music press may have struggled initially, it's possible that it has managed to hang on just long enough to figure out how to appeal to online audiences by

facilitating a rock discourse on its own sites and encouraging fans to rate records and create their own content. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many music websites allow users to contribute their own reviews, comments, and “share” buttons. Embedded music players allow readers to listen to tracks online and evaluate them. It seems obvious that if the mainstream music press wants to remain commercially viable, it will not only have to generate more revenue but also provide access to content not available to the wider public. Already, music magazines’ online counterparts and music webzines offer music videos, exclusive “first listens” to new material, and audiovisual content created specifically for web audiences. In a model more characteristic of the Enlightenment Era, the critic has become a moderator in the rock discourse that takes place between himself and the public—but there is still a distinction between the two.

It is difficult to assess whether or not the ability for fan response is providing music listeners with greater agency, or if interactivity is more of a commercial ploy by the music press to drive web hits. However, it is clear in the range of ways that music listeners can practice rock criticism online that public discourse on music is important to society and will continue. Though Weingarten and many of his contemporaries are convinced that they’ll soon be looking for new jobs, other music journalists see the potential for a renewal on the Internet. In fact, despite his pessimism about the rock critic, Weingarten is leading the charge on reshaping criticism to fit the demands of an Internet culture. In 2009 he completed a project he dubbed “1000TimesYes,” in which he completed 1,000 140-word album reviews via Twitter over the course of a year. Says Weingarten of the project:

There’s enough room in 140 characters to elaborate but have good writing. I try to make every one of my twitter reviews poetic as well as informative which is something everyone should think about no matter what you’re tweeting about. Be

a critic in whatever you do, let people know the why, let people know the how.
Just don't expect to get paid for it, ever (Weingarten 2009).

However optimistic, Weingarten's statement might reveal what is at the crux of the "death of the rock critic" debate: that fan response doesn't always provide the judgment and explanation that are the hallmarks of criticism. Still, if Weingarten and a new generation of digital music magazines are any indication, there is enough interest in the literary form to make a strong case for its preservation.

Eagleton argues that "it has only been when criticism [...] emits a lateral message about the shape and destiny of a whole culture that its voice has compelled widespread attention" (Eagleton 2005, p. 107). Clearly, what is taking place in the field of rock criticism is indicative of a move into the digital age, and in ways similar to early modern criticism, which was as much a move into the industrial age as was rock criticism into the profound cultural changes taking place in the 1960s.

It also remains to be seen how the mainstream music press fares as it continues to adapt to its digital presence. Like newspapers, music magazines continue to struggle with monetizing online advertising and subscriptions on the web. However, the incorporation of music videos and radio players has allowed for some crossover television and radio advertising, which could potentially trump print advertising sales.

It would seem, though, that in many ways the fate of rock criticism is now in the hands of the public—and in new generations who choose whether or not to preserve it as a literary form and a particular set of discursive practices. What was formulated by early rock critics was a way of translating the experience of listening into words; certainly new traditions and new ways of doing that will evolve. However, a combination of the importance of music in identity formation,

Internet publishing platforms and the availability of more and more new music online almost ensures that, while the rock critic as arbiter of taste may be an outdated model, the practice of rock criticism will remain alive and well as long as there are serious music fans with a drive to publish.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess whether or not the digital age has killed the rock critic. When there is a wealth of scholarship about the crisis facing the mainstream music press in the late 20th century, there have been few attempts to situate the vast rock discourse taking place in online environments within the broader history of modern criticism, or to make any sort of determination of the value of those criticisms. It seems that prior scholarship has taken an almost determinist stance on criticism, whereas this study posits it as a cyclical practice that is remade to meet the needs of each generation who produces it.

By proposing that rock criticism has become a discourse between “professional” rock critics, citizen critics, audiences, consumers and artists, this study was an attempt—though admittedly somewhat utopian—to recognize that public participation in dialogue about the arts has a distinct and valuable function. What has been lost in the digital age is not the impulse towards rock criticism, but the specific model of “rock critic” that remained relevant only in a society without the ability for feedback and response. If the explosion of user-generated criticism is any indication, the human impulse to understand and formulate opinions on music is alive and well—in part due to music’s function in identity formation. As in the Enlightenment Era, the drive to “self-cultivate” is inherent in digital culture, as there seem to be endless ways to produce, disseminate, consume and discuss the arts (especially music), activities that in some ways privilege the discourse on the arts over the arts themselves.

Further study is certainly necessary in determining the more specific ways in which audiences are using Internet publishing platforms to engage in rock criticism, the percentages of user reviews that display elements of true criticism versus those that are merely fan response, and the value of public opinion to rock criticism. There is some indication that while interactive features on mainstream music websites may increase the sense of audience agency, response and feedback forums are more useful for increasing web hits than they are for creating any sort of authentic discourse between the music press and audiences. Additional future study could conduct a systematic evaluation of the way that major music magazines draw audiences with interactivity and exclusive content.

Furthermore, there is a distinct difference between individually rated record reviews and the aggregated “customer ratings” featured on sites like Amazon and *Rolling Stone*. Since this study deliberately did not examine the commercial values of online forms of rock criticism, future study will be useful in determining how much effect customer reviews really have on record sales, if any.

Though the way in which rock criticism is being remade in the digital age is a complex topic that cannot be fully explored here, the aim of this study was to recognize the possibilities of the new criticisms being forged online by situating them within a broader history of criticism. Criticism as a discursive practice once seemed to be an idealized notion, but its possible that we are witnessing a revitalization of Enlightenment Era models for criticism in which public discussion of the arts is not limited to paid critics who act as arbiters of taste for consumers, but is accessible to all who wish to engage in it.

Surely, there is some benefit to the way the Internet encourages the critical faculty of the public, even if the results may have been detrimental to professional rock critics. Of course, with

the agency that the Internet provides comes responsibility: it remains to be seen how long rock criticism will be preserved as a literary form, and how long the major music magazine industry will manage to soldier on.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. 1989. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. John Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1989. Originally published in 1944.
- Atton, Chris. 2009. "Writing about listening: alternative discourses in rock journalism." *Popular Music*. 28/1: 53-67.
- Atton, Chris, and James F. Hamilton. *Alternative Journalism*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008.
- Bangs, Lester. 1987. *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung. The Work of A Legendary Critic: Rock n' Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock n' Roll*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bennett, Tony. 1988. Excerpt from "Theories of the Media, Theories of Society," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, reprint ed., edited by Michael Gurevitch et al. London: Routledge, 30-41.
- Bergesen, Alf R. 2008. Review of *Only by the Night*, By Kings of Leon "Getting Closer." On Amazon.com. http://www.amazon.com/Only-By-The-Night/dp/B001FXCE46/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1319751527&sr=8-3
- Carey, James W. 1997. "The Chicago School and the History of Mass Communication Research," in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, edited by Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 14-33.

- Crossley, Ed Nick and John Michael Roberts. 2004. *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*. Blackwell Publishing/The Sociological Review. London: Oxford University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 2005. *The Function of Criticism*. London: Verso.
- Eyerman, Ron and Andrew Jamison. 1998. *Music and Social Movements*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Frith, Simon. 2007. *Taking Popular Music Seriously*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jones, Steve. 2002. *Pop Music and the Press*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kirby, Alan. 2009. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*. New York: Continuum.
- Kot, Greg. 2009 *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music*. New York: Scribner.
- Lindberg, Ulf with Gestur Gudmundsson, Moreten Michelsen and Hans Weisethaunet. 2005. *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-headed Cruisers*. New York: Peter Lang.
- MacDonald, Dwight. 1993. "A Theory of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture*, edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press,) 59–73.
- McDonald, Rónán. 2007. *The Death of the Critic*. London: Continuum.

- McLeese, Don. 2010. "Straddling the Cultural Chasm: The Great Divide between Music Criticism and Popular Consumption." *Popular Music and Society*. 33 (4): 433-47..
- Palmer, Robert. 1992 "Rock Begins" in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*. Edited by Anthony DeCurtis and James Henke with Holly George-Warren. New York: Random House.
- Pratt, Ray. 1990. *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations into the Political Uses of Popular Music*. New York: Praeger.
- Shuker, Roy. 2008. *Understanding Popular Music*. London: Routledge.
- Weingarten, Christopher. 2009. "Twitter & the Death of Rock Criticism." Speech presented at the Annual Twitter Conference, June 2009.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1968. *The Critic as Artist*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Williams Paul. 2002. *The Crawdaddy! book: writings (and images) from the magazine of rock*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation.