In the Groove: American Rock Criticism, 1966-1978

by
Laura Sikes
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Supervised by Professor Joan Shelley Rubin
Department of History
Arts, Sciences and Engineering
School of Arts and Sciences

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For My Mama

In Memory of My Grandfathers
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Biographical Sketch

The author was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. She attended Louisiana State University and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and English in 2005. She began doctoral studies in History at the University of Rochester in 2008. She was awarded a Dean’s Dissertation Fellowship in 2011. She pursued her research in American History under the direction of Professor Joan Shelley Rubin.
Abstract

Rock and roll music was a national youth obsession for a dozen years before the first rock critics began writing seriously about the form. Rock was dismissed by adult cultural authorities as empty, degraded, and even dangerous. However, to its fans, rock was an important form of personal expression, a source of group identity, and a mode of political discourse. Rock critics understood its cultural and political power. In their work, they explained its importance to the American public.

In 1966, the first rock critic, Richard Goldstein, began writing about rock and roll in a weekly column in the Village Voice called “Pop Eye.” In it, he asserted that rock and roll was an art that deserved the same recognition and protections afforded to other art forms. By 1967, The New Yorker hired Ellen Willis to write about rock in a regular column called “Rock, Etc.” She brought an intellectual sophistication to the genre that would resound long after her career as a rock critic ended. Later in 1967, Rolling Stone debuted; it would become the most visible and influential source of rock criticism for the next fifty years. Editor Jann Wenner’s tastes and approach would affect the way rock was perceived in his own time and for decades after. Finally, in 1968, Lester Bangs debuted onto the scene, writing artful reviews for publications like Creem and Rolling Stone, explaining the changes that were taking place as rock music splintered into subgenres like punk and heavy metal.

The quality of these rock critics’ thought and the influence of their writing makes rock criticism an important and under-studied branch of Sixties literature.
Each of the rock critics addressed in this dissertation explained to the public what rock music meant and why it mattered. By placing rock in its social, political, and cultural context, they demonstrated that it was far from the empty form cultural authorities thought it was. Their work permanently changed perceptions of popular music, proving that it was substantial enough to stand up to the same kind of critical treatment as other art forms.
Contributors and Funding Sources

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Chapter One: Introduction

“One of the most striking phenomena to come out of the rock revolution has been words; and not the words of the songs, but the words written about them.”


Rock criticism was born of the tumult of the 1960s, the product of young, innovative, and passionate writers who sought to capture the sounds and themes of a musical genre that defied conventions by writing in a style that did the same. In its original form, rock journalism flourished for around a decade, but its influence continues to permeate American culture. It permanently changed perceptions of the artistic and social possibilities of popular music. Rock critics proved that musical value was not limited to a certain genre or demographic, expanding the boundaries of what was considered important art.

Rock journalists showed that rock music, rather than fitting into prevailing polarities of serious/popular, artistic/commercial, and high/low, accommodated and was animated by each of these tensions. Rock rendered traditional categories of criticism impotent, creating the need for new modes of understanding musical value that considered the nuances of popular music as both an art form and a commercial product. Rock was simultaneously celebratory and critical of society. It was
reflective of and defiant of the American culture that produced it. Rock music’s complicated cultural role was difficult for most prominent cultural authorities to process, but it was clear to everyone, fans and detractors alike, that it was hugely influential.

It was a crucial part of the hugely powerful youth culture during a period of enormous societal flux, and as such, it needed explaining. Rock critics filled that role, guiding both fans and neophytes alike through the rock counterculture. These writers explored the rich context that produced rock and guided readers through the vibrant youth culture that it fostered in turn. The need for a new critical approach to rock and roll music followed from the obvious disinclination (even inability) of musical and cultural authorities to accommodate an increasingly powerful social and cultural force.¹

Taking advantage of the Sixties’ crisis of cultural authority, these young writers used their criticism as a medium through which to challenge conceptions of popular music’s value. Rock writers asserted the artistic and social possibilities of popular music, desacralizing traditional American musical hierarchies and canons. In the process, they changed the face of music criticism, creating a body of literary

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¹ What was the “establishment” that so dominated sixties discourse about authority and power? According to a *New Yorker* article from 1968, the first usage of the term dates to 1955, when it was first used in Britain’s *Spectator* magazine by British journalist and social critic, Henry Fairlie. He explained, “By the ‘Establishment,’ I do not mean only the centres of official power—though they are certainly part of it—but rather the whole matrix of official and social relations within which power is exercised” (quoted in Henry Fairlie, “Onward and Upward with the Arts: Evolution of a Term,” *New Yorker*, Oct. 19, 1968, 175). Within this dissertation, I will use the term as shorthand to refer to the critical, musical, journalistic, and academic figures whose authority rock journalists came to challenge. The term, though vague, is useful because it refers to the rebellious, anti-authoritarian attitude of sixties radicals that was itself nebulous.
work marked by unabashed subjectivity, literary artistry, and social relevance. This resulted in a more serious treatment of the music, including its strong political, social, and cultural themes. By convincing Americans to take rock more seriously, rock critics amplified the power of the countercultural content of the music.

Rock criticism quickly became a powerful medium. It spurred social, political, and cultural change, as well as adding an important body of writing to American literature. Socially, these critics served as tour guides to a rock subculture that was changing the world, explaining their generation’s perspective to mainstream Americans. It also brought fans together into an imagined community of like-minded youths, spurring conversations amongst them about rock’s meaning and possibilities.

Politically, rock criticism served as an essential part of the youth revolt. The music was an important vehicle for disseminating political messages and ideas to the counterculture, and critics served as mediators between the politically laden music and their audience. They helped explain the vast political changes that characterized the tumultuous period of the long Sixties, which lasted from 1958-1974, to their readers in real time, making sense of events while reinforcing the political context of rock music.

Part of the revolutionary project of the Sixties movement was cultural, and in this respect, many early rock critics acted as leaders of its cultural wing. By challenging stale cultural hierarchies, unresponsive cultural institutions, and condescending cultural authorities, they attempted to make cultural appreciation more democratic. They believed criticism should be more reflective of what types of
art moved in the lives of a broader spectrum of Americans than were traditionally addressed by music critics. Finally, the literature of rock criticism is an important and underrecognized branch of the New Journalism, the challenging, innovative, and vital writing style that emphasized subjectivity and storytelling. The New Journalism gave early rock critics the tools to convey the vibrancy and dynamism of the counterculture. The resulting work transcends its subject material, standing alone as both artful writing and as crucial primary sources that attempt, often successfully, to intellectually organize the fast-paced changes of the period.

In recounting the history of the golden age of rock journalism, this dissertation will show that rock critics changed the way Americans viewed popular music, uprooting it from the bottom of the cultural hierarchy and planting it at the center of American cultural life. The four subjects discussed in this dissertation represent different aspects of rock and roll criticism as it changed and developed over time. Just like rock itself, rock criticism ranged from the serious to the superficial, from refinement to impulsivity. These subjects also demonstrated varying levels of commitment to the causes of the 1960s, particularly the counterculture. But each in their own their way helped to shape the profession at a time when it was still new and forming.

Each of the subjects of this dissertation were chosen because they represent aspects of early rock criticism that are essential to its development. Richard Goldstein was the first rock critic, and his radical politics and aesthetics pervaded the genre long after he stopped writing criticism. He was the pioneer, and in order to
understand how rock criticism developed, it is necessary to understand the foundations he laid.

Ellen Willis was the first female rock critic, providing a crucial perspective to the field that the male-dominated genre was lacking. But her contributions to the field extended well beyond her gender; she was also one of the best writers of all the rock critics. Her intellectual sophistication and mental acuity gave credibility to the young genre. She changed the conversation about rock in many ways, including by opening it up to female voices. Simultaneously, she elevated the level of discourse as much as any rock critic ever has.

Jann Wenner represents a different side of rock criticism, one that must be accounted for just as much as its aesthetic or intellectual sides. Wenner represented the influence of bald capitalism on the way rock criticism was written, becoming a billionaire by successfully monetizing the genre. As the primary force behind the most successful vehicle for rock criticism in history, he is the single strongest force behind the way the rock is perceived in American culture. Although reviled by many who view his influence on rock negatively, his impact on the field of rock criticism is undeniable.

Lester Bangs rounds out the subjects of this dissertation. His role was twofold: he helped to intellectually organize the genre at a time of enormous change and writing some of the most enduring criticism in the history of rock. He represents an important shift that happened in rock and roll (and its criticism) over the course of the Seventies. Rock music began to splinter into distinct subgenres. For Bangs, the
most important of these subgenres were punk and metal music, and he was instrumental in defining them. He ushered in a new era of rock music, when the monolithic rock genre became a hydra. Meanwhile, he had a powerful stylistic influence on the style of rock journalism. His brash, gonzo, stream-of-consciousness style suited the nihilistic era, combined with an engaging intellect. He became one of the most talented and renowned rock critics in history. He worked at a time of drastic changes in the field, and with Goldstein, he bookends the first era of rock criticism by chronicling its disintegration.

Each chapter follows a roughly chronological arrangement. Chapter Two provides an overview of the history of the two component elements of rock criticism, music criticism and rock and roll music. The background of the practice of music criticism, particularly in the United States, shows that conceptions of popular forms have long been affected by classism and elitism, attitudes that the first rock critics fought to change. They worked to convince Americans that what was considered “low culture” had as much artistic potential as conventional “high culture.” The first rock critics fought to remake cultural categories and institutions that had become frozen and unresponsive to the realities of twentieth-century American culture.

The second half of Chapter Two explains how rock music evolved to have this revolutionary effect on conceptions of cultural hierarchy. It took over ten years for rock to develop its own critical apparatus. Before that, discussions of the music in the press were dominated by its detractors. Many political, cultural, and social factors converged to create the context that produced the first rock critics. Among
them were major generational and demographic shifts, changes in the political landscape that made rock’s content more relevant to its listeners than ever, and developments in the music that elevated the content and stylistic possibilities of rock. Sixties rock inspired its critics to challenge longstanding cultural norms, and in order to appreciate how their work was revolutionary, it is necessary to understand the context it came from.

Chapter Three is about Richard Goldstein, the first writer in the country to publish rock criticism in a major publication. Working for the *Village Voice* beginning in 1966, Goldstein made some of the first concerted efforts to get rock music taken seriously by cultural authorities and the public. As a booster of rock and roll and intermediary between the counterculture and the mainstream, he had a significant influence on the way the rock music was viewed by the American public. Goldstein acted as an ambassador from the rock and roll counterculture to the rest of America, explaining the music and scene in papers and magazines like the *New York Times* and *Vogue*. Meanwhile, through his weekly column at the *Village Voice*, Pop Eye, he reached out to an audience of fellow fans. He provided others of his generation with a cultural outlet that spoke directly to their interests.

As one of its earliest critics, he had an enormous influence on not only the ideological approach later critics would take to rock music, but also the style and tone of rock criticism. He was trained at the Columbia Journalism School, so he brought a professional quality to the form, but he was also an adherent of the New Journalism school of writing, which was distinctly non-traditional. Its emphasis on
subjectivity as opposed to the traditional ideal of journalistic objectivity is part of what made the New Journalism transgressive. His subjectivity meant that his writing was deeply personal and intimately tied to his radical political beliefs. To Goldstein, rock and roll was the artistic wing of the “movement.” He felt strongly that as his generation’s chosen mode of personal and political expression, rock and roll deserved to be taken seriously as a cultural force. In arguing for rock’s importance, he was asserting himself and his generation, demanding respect for them and their artistic forms. In his role as a tour guide and explainer of the music and the counterculture, he showed a broad audience that rock was substantial enough to stand up to rigorous cultural criticism.

The fourth chapter is about Ellen Willis, the first female rock critic and one of the most talented writers of the genre. Her first major piece about rock and roll, *Dylan*, was published in 1967. In it, she wrote about Bob Dylan’s music and career in a fashion that resembled literary criticism in its application of theory, creation of a linear canon of artistic influence, and explication Dylan’s lyrics. On the strength of this article, one of the best works of rock criticism ever written, she was hired by the *New Yorker* to be their first rock and roll columnist. Her style was literary and serious, and she brought an academic edge to the genre. She helped to intellectually organize the genre and its history at a time when that history was still being written. By mapping out where rock came from for her upper-middlebrow readers, she proved it was far from an empty form. It had its own history and canon and she was going to help explain it.
Like Goldstein, she practiced the New Journalism, and her work was marked by the subjective approach its practitioners promoted. Her work was very personal and, because she was a radical, redolent with her political ideals. She did not believe it was necessary to separate the political and professional parts of her life. She was a member of the New Left and co-founder of the radical feminist group the Redstockings, and her work reflects these commitments. Because her cultural and political goals were so entwined, she used her rock criticism to challenge the counterculture’s commitment to radical ideals. Her intellectualism combined with her engaging writing to make an indelible mark on the field as one of its greatest thinkers, prefiguring her later role as an important public intellectual.

Chapter Five examines the influence of Jann Wenner, the wunderkind publisher behind *Rolling Stone* magazine. As the most visible and prominent publication about rock music, *Rolling Stone* has had an unparalleled impact on the way that rock was perceived, from its founding in 1967 through to today. Some of the most important rock critics of the Sixties wrote for the magazine, and from its pages they helped to shape both rock music sales and its enduring canon. It became an indispensable source of industry news, one-on-one interviews, and later, political content and literature. Although important, high-quality work often graced its pages, some of the ways in which the magazine operated were problematic. From the undue influence of the recording industry on the magazine to the effects of Wenner’s unadulterated hero worship on his editorial choices, the legacy of the *Rolling Stone* must be examined considering the factors that determined its treatment of the music.
This is particularly important considering the enormous role *Rolling Stone* has played in writing the history of rock music.

Finally, Chapter Six is about Lester Bangs, the wildest, most rebellious, and, perhaps, the most gifted of all the early rock critics. From the beginning of his career in 1969, his brash and bold approach captured the spirit of rock and roll in style as well as content. He wrote for *Rolling Stone*, but his most indelible work was produced during his time at *Creem* magazine, an edgy, alternative publication out of Detroit. From his position as a writer and editor there, he made a huge impression on rock music just as it was undergoing massive changes and internal divisions. His reporting on the nascent forms of punk and metal was definitive, as he helped to set the terms in which those genres were understood.

His writing was important for its content, but it was famous for its unique style. One of the most impressionistic and colorful writers the genre has ever seen, his work was evocative of the feeling of rock and roll. Unlike some of his peers, he was rarely pedantic, but he understood and explained the history of rock music as well as any of them. His writing could be slapdash and undisciplined, but his lack of polish was part of his appeal. He embodied the rock and roll spirit, in all its roughness as well as its passion and creativity. Later in his career, he joined *Village Voice*. With Robert Christgau as his editor, his writing reached a new level of maturity, and the quality of Bangs’ thought on rock music was unparalleled.

In examining these four figures, this dissertation will add to the small but growing body of literature about the origins and development of rock criticism.
Although many compendiums exist of early rock critics’ writing, the historical treatment of their lives and work is still sparse, despite rock critics’ importance as cultural leaders, literary figures, and public intellectuals. Each of the subjects of this dissertation have published successful anthologies.

Richard Goldstein’s *Reporting the Counterculture* was released in 1989, and contains some of the best examples of his hybridized cultural and political writing. In addition, Goldstein published an autobiography in 2015, *Another Little Piece of My Heart: My Life of Rock and Revolution in the ’60s*, which recounts his experiences in the 1960s at the center of the rock counterculture.

Ellen Willis has four collections. *Beginning to See the Light* (1992) is focused on her rock writing, while *No More Nice Girls* (1992) features her work (both rock related and not) on feminist subjects. Since her death in 2006, two more volumes, *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music* (2011) and *The Essential Ellen Willis* (2014), have highlighted her contributions to rock criticism and cultural criticism. Both were edited by her daughter, Nona Willis Aronowitz, who has helped to raise Willis’ profile among a new generation.

The number of collections from *Rolling Stone* are too numerous to list here, as they have been produced in a steady stream for over four decades now. Many of the early pieces of rock criticism from *Rolling Stone* are collected in *Rolling Stone: The Decades of Rock & Roll* (2001). Many of the interviews that helped make *Rolling Stone* famous can be found in 2007’s *The Rolling Stone Interviews*, which was edited by Wenner along with Joe Levy. In addition, Jann Wenner has been
written about in Robert Draper’s *Rolling Stone Magazine: An Uncensored History* (1990), a colorful history of the magazine focused on the character of the man at its helm.

Lester Bangs’ work has been collected into two well-respected volumes, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Critic: Rock’N’Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock’N'Roll* (1988) and *Main Lines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader* (2003). Bangs is, along with Wenner, one of the two rock critics discussed in this dissertation to have a biography written about him, the superb *Let It Blurt: The Life and Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic* (2000). Author Jim DeRogatis captures Bangs’ trickster nature along with his peculiar kind of troubled genius, adding insight to the inner workings and personal development of a writer whose rebellious spirit and early death made him a heavily mythologized figure in the world of rock music.

Historical monographs about rock criticism are few, but those that do exist have made strong contributions to a growing understanding of the genre and its importance to American history and letters. 2005’s *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-Headed Cruisers* by Ulf Lindberg, Gestur Guðmundsson, and Morten Michelsen is an overview of the history of rock criticism in Britain and America from the 1960s to the present.

Goldstein, Powers explores the development of the *Voice*’s pop criticism as a platform for writers to engage as public intellectuals. She ties the work they did to the later development of cultural studies in academia. Powers effectively traces the influence of the *Voice* platform in the context of media studies as well as cultural history.

This dissertation will join these works in telling the story of rock and roll criticism in its early years. It explains where rock criticism came from, how it developed, and what it meant to American society. By focusing on four key figures from the first decade of rock criticism’s existence, this history will show the way the genre took shape and how it shaped American culture in turn. A powerful influence on cultural understandings of popular music, rock criticism is an important and understudied body of Sixties journalism. As primary sources and literary works, the historical value of rock criticism is too great to remain unexamined by historians.
Chapter Two: The Roots of Rock Criticism

When rock and roll criticism debuted in the mid-1960s, it came from a complex set of historical circumstances that would inform its characteristics and subsequent development. Young people were a more powerful demographic than ever before, and the music they consumed was an essential part of a cultural rebellion that had far-reaching effects on the country. A combination of the increased relevance of the music to social, political, and cultural change and the enormous market behind it led to rock music being treated more seriously by cultural critics and public intellectuals. Rock critics were at the center of this shift. It took almost a decade for the genre to produce its first critics. Why did it take so long, and why did the criticism appear when it did? Historical developments in American music criticism, rock and roll culture, national politics, race relations, and major demographic shifts all converged to form the context from which rock criticism emerged.

A basic overview of these elements will provide a foundation for understanding rock criticism’s ultimate shape. Both the history of American music criticism, particularly that of popular styles, as well as the history of rock and roll provide essential context for effectively analyzing rock criticism. The American tradition of music criticism is long but has historically been oriented primarily around classical music. Rock and roll is a popular music form, which means that it was treated with limited regard by most music critics and cultural authorities for many years. There was little precedent for the serious critical treatment of popular
music, almost all of which came from the world of jazz. The history of jazz criticism provides context for how rock and roll music was approached, as jazz faced many of the same cultural challenges that rock did. Jazz critics also paved the way for rock critics in the way that they responded to challenges of both theory and form.

To understand the way rock writing developed, it is also necessary to examine the history of rock and roll—how it began and how it changed over time. Where did it come from and how did that affect the way it was treated and perceived? What were the defining qualities of rock and roll that made it so meaningful in the lives of its fans and led to the groundswell of its critics? Discovering what was essential to the genre is helpful to understanding what qualities rock critics valued in making their assessments. Finally, assessing the role that rock and roll played in society will provide context that will illuminate the deeper social meaning behind rock critics’ work.

Early writing about rock and roll reveals the genre’s road to respectability was long and difficult, and its challenges were only overcome by its critics’ determination and passion for the form. This chapter provides a framework for understanding the historical circumstances that led to rock critics’ emergence and, subsequently, changes in cultural perceptions of rock and roll.

Rock and roll criticism is part of a longer tradition of music criticism, and although rock critics challenged many of its conventions, they were still connected to this tradition. How did the practice of music criticism begin and how does it work? When does writing about music become music criticism? Whether classical,
jazz, or rock and roll, there are qualities that all good music criticism shares.

Fundamentally, the function of the music critic is to shorten the distance between the art and the audience, and in doing so enrich the experience of listening to music.

Criticism of the arts has always been a part of cultural life, “an all-embracing timeless scheme in which all productions, good and bad, significant and trivial, have to find their place.”

Music criticism as a branch of literature began during the Enlightenment and was animated from the start by the era’s spirit of “social and political inquiry.” Music criticism has historically “served as a forum for discussion of a wide range of social, political, and religious issues.” Because music has the capacity to people on a personal level, there is a natural tendency, as with any art, to analyze and explain how it works in peoples’ lives. Music theorist and composer Edward T. Cone writes that critics “must try to grasp … [music’s] spirit—Geist—that mysterious quality that somehow reflects the outlook of the individual, the social milieu, and the age that produced it.”

In the age of mass consumer culture, a critic’s task is easily confused with that of the music reviewer. Critics’ examination of music’s Geist that distinguishes

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3 Ibid.


their work from that of other music writers. Whereas the reviewer’s primary goal is to ensure that a consumer’s musical purchases will be to their liking, music critics, like literary critics, could theoretically build an entire career without once addressing new works. However, at its best, “[w]hen description evolves into interpretation, when summary judgment gives way to reasoned evaluation, reviewing becomes criticism.” 6 Critics must “tell the truth about music as he believes that to be” and “to report the music life of his community truthfully.” 7 Not all criticism achieves this ideal; some “of the criticism which reaches the public eye is a mere record of the doings of performers.” 8

Critics are “the foremost agent in bringing to the public a perception of the nature of musical art and the ends sought by composers.” 9 They facilitate a closer connection between artist and audience by teaching readers how to listen to music, explaining where it fits into the musical tradition, defining musical canon, and by sharing their own lived experience of listening. It seems counterintuitive that the insertion of an intermediate object between a work of art and its observer should lessen the distance between the two. Ultimately, it is the successful performance of

6 Cone, 3.


9 Ibid, 315.
this mediative function that determines critics’ success or failure. Cultural historian Jacques Barzun agrees:

The role of critic is, in a word, to act as go-between, as midwife, between the artist’s conception and the beholder’s recognition of it in the created thing. The critic says: ‘Where you see chaos, or possibly where you see nothing at all, there exists nevertheless a valuable entity. It has such and such features. Look at this, and again look at that. If you will but subject yourself to its influence once more, noting the truly salient parts, I will try to point out their connection and their meaning. I will, in the fullest sense of the term, identify the object for you, so that you will never again misconceive its place and purport, nor mistake it for another or for a dead thing.10

The litmus test of effective criticism asks, “Does this criticism adequately bridge the distance between the musical work and its audience?”

In addition to critics’ mediative function, they perform another important role as a creative entity unto themselves. They serve double duty, both and explaining others’ artistic creations and creating something new—intellectual discourse on the nature of art and its relationship to the society in which it was created.11 Whether critics’ creative role is subordinate to his analytic task is a question that has preoccupied theorists and historians. Edward Lueders, an early chronicler of American music criticism, wrote, “The critic must cultivate the literary medium which serves him, and must realize that he is primarily a craftsman of rhetoric.”12


More recently, theorists, “refusing to group criticism with other forms of discursive writing, claim it as a creative product, indistinguishable in its aim, means, and end from novels, poems, or plays.”\textsuperscript{13} Some, like Harold Bloom “behold no differences, in kind or degree, between the language of poetry and the language of criticism.”\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand, some literary critics, including Rene Wellek, disagree: “A feeling for art will enter into criticism: many critical forms require artistic skills of composition and style; imagination has its share in all knowledge and science. Still, I do not believe that the critic is an artist or that criticism is an art (in the strict modern sense). Its aim is intellectual cognition.”\textsuperscript{15} Wellek is correct in identifying an aim of criticism as “intellectual cognition,” but he is wrong to think that this cognition is enough without the success of a critic as a creative entity, because music criticism is dependent on the writer’s ability to reproduce a lived experience.

The aural phenomenon of music, more than the visual arts or literature, resists translation into literary form. Without the successful execution of their own creative product, the critic’s insights into the creations of another have little chance of succeeding. In his tellingly titled “The Art of Judging Music,” Virgil Thomson theorizes that “[t]he art of formulating musical judgments is chiefly the art of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Vendler, 9.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Wellek, 4.
\end{itemize}
describing music.”\textsuperscript{16} To successfully translate sound into words requires more than “a feeling for art;” it is an art form unto itself. The successful critic “can, through words, enable his readers to imagine [music] with him.”\textsuperscript{17} The intellectual and analytical side of the endeavor is dependent on the critic’s literary ability, for the audience must be able to imagine the musical subject at hand to grasp the significance of the critic’s analysis.

Whereas the music reviewer says what they like and don’t like in a musical piece, the critic goes further. The critic explains what the music means, adding a depth to the question of whether it is good to listen to by explaining the many factors involved in its success or failure. It is in exploring this deeper meaning that the critic distinguishes themselves, incorporating social, cultural, political, as well as personal contexts into their assessments. Good criticism is not merely a reaction to a recording or performance. Rather, it incorporates an entire universe of experiences and influences as understood through the lens of the music. The music is a vehicle for exploring a myriad of issues and ideas about culture, society, and politics. In engaging with such issues, the critic creates something new. Although the critic explains what the music means as best as they can, an explanation does not necessarily mean that they simplify the musical experience for the listeners. Criticism is often an attempt to complicate the way it is heard by the critic’s readers.

\textsuperscript{16} Thomson, 40.

\textsuperscript{17} Cone, 8.
In this way, it makes the experience of listening richer than it otherwise would be. Elucidation through simplification isn't the goal; in this way, they are different from music reviewers, for whom the goal is to simplify the consumer’s question of whether the musical production is worth their consumer dollars. That is not to say that the music critic does not guide the consumer. However, the central question they answer is not, “Is this worth the buyer’s money?” Rather, they ask, “What is the value of this music to the individual and society?”

In summation, the critic serves the audience in several ways. They render the experience of music richer through thoughtful analysis. To do so, they place the music in its social, cultural, and political context. By providing his context, they bridge the gap between artist and audience, explaining how the work moves in the lives of its audience (or alternatively, why it fails to do so). Finally, they promote quality music and steer listeners away from music that isn’t worth their time.

To effectively guide their audiences, critics must demonstrate reliably good taste. Value judgments about art forms are subjective, so how can readers evaluate whether the opinions of the critic are sound, beyond whether it coincides with their own opinions? First, critics must be able to effectively back up their opinions with sufficient supporting examples from the music. They should also be able to draw appropriate comparisons or contrasts with known music. The critic must display an understanding of the music’s history and use it to make the listener better understand its context.
Two styles of criticism predominate music criticism, and most works are a combination of the two, with varying proportions of each. The first is the impressionistic style, which tends toward poetic and emotional descriptions. These more florid writings emphasize the personally-felt aspects of a performance or recording. On the other hand, some critics focus on the intellectual qualities of a work, such as its technical features, its musical lineage, and its composition. While few literary works ever fit neatly into stylistic bifurcations such as the impressionistic/pedantic divide, these categories provide a useful model for stylistic analysis of music criticism.

Depending on the genre of music, critics’ approaches vary. Popular music criticism, as opposed to classical or opera criticism, has its own unique history and characteristics that are reflected in its body of literature. Rock criticism, just like any writing, built on work that came before it. Earlier critics dealt with many of the same issues of class, race, and generational conflict that rock critics would face. For one hundred and fifty years of the nation’s history, there was no tradition of popular music criticism in America. Whereas European art music had a rich critical tradition in America dating back to the 18th century, popular music was considered undeserving of critics’ attention. Popular music was viewed as antithetical to “classical music,” a term introduced in the early 1800s to describe European art music. Whereas classical music consisted of the most rewarding, edifying, and beautiful artworks, popular music was viewed as inherently inferior, unimportant,
and ephemeral. Influential 19th century music critic John Sullivan Dwight wrote in his *Dwight’s Journal of Music* in 1858,

[W]e hear classical opposed to popular music, as if it were something not meant for the many, but for the few—for cultivated tastes—for "the appreciative"—for those in whose life-plan music holds so serious a place that they have deemed it worth their while to learn to love what there is best in it, and not remain content with what is easiest, or what it is the fashion of the day to like and be amused with.\(^{18}\)

According to Dwight, people did not like popular music based on its good qualities (which he was loathe to acknowledge existed), but because it was faddish and convenient. Historian Paul Charosh explains,

the term "classical" was not merely an adjective denoting older music of merit, and "popular" did not simply identify music in vogue or known by many. Some "classical" pieces were newly composed, and some "popular" pieces, as we shall see, were almost unknown, even in their time. Rather, the terms are used as they are today: to identify dichotomously related classes of generally superior and inferior quality, and with different pretensions. Inferior music was associated with inferior people.\(^{19}\)

From this period, popular music was regularly denigrated by music writers. Through the 1800s, the distinction between the high and low grew more in the minds of the public as well as cultural authorities. There was a shift from a “cultural lexicon that cut through class and income” in the nineteenth century to a “much [less] fluid, much [more] rigidly hierarchical” culture in the twentieth century.\(^{20}\)


sociologist Paul DiMaggio, “[b]y 1910, high and popular culture were far less likely to be encountered in the same settings” than in the past.\textsuperscript{21}

As “worthy” art was elevated by critics to a new plane of cultural importance, standards for the consumption of these works also changed. Operas and concerts’ diverse and lively crowds, once evidence of America’s democratic culture, were decried frequently in newspaper coverage of musical events for their lack of decorum. Levine notes, “the masterworks of the classic composers were to be performed... free from the interference of audience or performer...[A]udiences were to approach the masters and their works with proper respect and proper seriousness, for aesthetic and spiritual elevation rather than mere entertainment was the goal.”\textsuperscript{22} Joseph Horowitz argues that in the late nineteenth century, belief in the “pious content and moral power of art” led to the sacralization of high culture.\textsuperscript{23} Sacralization, according to DiMaggio, was responsible for “the definition of high culture and its opposite, popular culture and the institutionalization of this classification.”\textsuperscript{24}

Levine and DiMaggio, among others, believe that elites’ traditional sources of social and economic power were endangered by industrialization and

\textsuperscript{21} Paul DiMaggio, \textit{The American Arts Audience, Its Study and Its Character} (Cambridge, Mass: Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1977), 34.

\textsuperscript{22} Levine, \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow}, 146.


\textsuperscript{24} DiMaggio, 35.
urbanization, leading them to exert their power through manipulation of cultural forms and modes of cultural consumption. By sacralizing culture, they argue, elites could justify the sequestration of the “high” arts from the public sphere, where its association with popular forms or boorish audiences would degrade it. As the high arts were elevated and sequestered, they became increasingly distant from popular arts. Complicit in this scheme are music critics, serving as they did as mediators between the public and the musical arts.

Historians like Ralph Locke, Joseph Horowitz, and Joan Shelley Rubin have challenged sacralization theory, rejecting the notion that the arts boom of the late nineteenth century was simply a genteel exercise in social control. Locke calls this view “oversimplified,” issuing “a plea for a more accurate, multifaceted, and appreciative view” of America’s musical past.25 According to Horowitz, “[t]he argument for social control is not supported by close acquaintance with the musical high culture of the period.”26 He reminds readers that Gilded Age cultural authorities’ “elitist currents, spurning the rabble, [were] balanced by a democratic urge to edify.”27

Rubin calls for a nuanced approach to cultural hierarchy, fearing that attempts to locate the origins of cultural categories have “reified and perpetuated the conventional dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, overlooking the

25 Horowitz, 89.
26 Ibid, 245.
27 Ibid, 89.
interaction between the two.” Although there was ample of interaction between high and low culture, by the 1920s, the idea of the classical/popular dichotomy predominated discourse around music. It would continue to affect perceptions of popular music through the period when the rock critics began their work.

With the popularity of jazz, some music critics challenged perceptions of popular music’s place in the cultural hierarchy. Swift progress in recording technology meant that popular music was becoming an increased presence in Americans’ daily lives. Meanwhile, America’s homegrown genre, jazz, was a global hit, even a craze. Though critics had occasionally incorporated discussions of jazz into their work, “most writing about jazz blamed syncopated dance music for threatening the mores of American youth and posing a serious danger to the survival of western civilization.” This would be echoed in the objections to rock made by

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29 Jazz and ragtime, though significantly different, were often conflated by white music observers. Moreover, “jazz” could refer to either symphonic or improvised small-group jazz. “It is no wonder that critics are unable to agree when no two of them are discussing the same thing. The word ‘jazz’ as it is currently seems to cover both true jazz and popular music in general.” (Roger Pryor Dodge, “Negro Jazz,” *The Dancing Times*, 1929, 229.) Thus, when discussing jazz, the critics examined herein may be referring to ragtime, symphonic jazz, or jazz proper. For more on jazz terminology, see Dan Borus, *Twentieth Century Multiplicity: American Thought and Culture, 1900-1920*, (Lanham, MD, 2009), 90; Ronald G. Welburn, “Duke Ellington’s Music: The Catalyst for a True Jazz Criticism,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jun., 1986), 113-114.

alarmed parents and authorities in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, the perceived threat of jazz went beyond its cultural influence to the social and political. John Gennari writes of the “paranoiac ravings of Progressive reformers in the 1920s who held jazz responsible or rising rates of dope addiction and illegitimate birth, and Protestant ministers who labeled it the ‘Devil’s music.’”31 The idea that jazz was degenerate was based on racial as well as class prejudices, not just its popular appeal. However, most music critics couched their aspersions against it on mainly cultural hierarchy.

“The emergence of serious critical journalism for lowly jazz was heretical to followers of classical music,” writes jazz historian Ron Welburn.32 The first critic to assault the status quo was Gilbert Seldes, whose The 7 Lively Arts made the argument that jazz music was artistically on par with, or even superior to, traditional classical music. In the 1920s when Seldes rose to prominence, no other music critic had yet acknowledged that popular music in any form was worthy of critical attention, much less respect.33 Seldes’ “discovery,” as he described it, was “that the popular arts were worthy of ‘intelligent criticism.’”34 Seldes recalled, “as no one else

32 Welburn in The Oxford Companion to Jazz, 745.
33 Michael Kammen, introduction to The 7 Lively Arts, by Gilbert Seldes (Toronto: Courier Dover Publications, 2001), xi.
was writing about the popular arts, I had a free field. It was good luck.”  

He believed that “the same critical standards should be applied to the arts at all taste levels” and “chastised those who praised high culture just because it was ‘high’ rather for being first-rate.”  

Seldes called not for an abandonment of cultural hierarchy, believing that some works of art were better than others, but rather a reconsideration of the notion that musical artistry was limited to genteel forms. Seldes “responded to [the] waning of cultural authority—exemplified by the dissipated genteel tradition— as an opportunity to reformulate the nature and thrust of expository criticism.”  

Seldes was alone when he began challenging classical music’s monopoly on artistry, but soon jazz criticism became a “journalistic phenomenon, a new literature for a new music in a new century.”  

By 1926, the Phonograph Monthly Review’s founder, R. D. Darrell, became the first of a handful of professional critics to write about jazz in periodicals. Darrell’s publication was devoted mostly to symphonic jazz.  

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35 Ibid.  
36 Kammen in Seldes, xxxvi.  
37 Ibid, xi.  
38 Welburn in The Oxford Companion to Jazz, 745.  
39 Symphonic jazz is “the music composed for symphony orchestras or chamber ensembles that possesses elements of jazz rhythm, melodic contour, and the kind of harmony associated with blacks,” according to Ronald Welburn. The critical attention paid to this style “properly falls in the realm of classical music and formal music critical theory and practice.” (Welburn, “Duke Ellington’s Music: The Catalyst for a True Jazz Criticism,” 113.)
music, but as an ardent fan of jazz, he believed that the popular form warranted critical attention, too. Respected English critic Constant Lambert joined the twenty-six-year-old Darrell at his new publication, despite its limited circulation, because of its innovative approach. Neither abandoned traditional classical music criticism, but together they added a sense of high-end respectability to jazz criticism. Lambert and Darrell were inspired by their subject to “enliven the language of criticism through an approach that was enjoyable to read.”

Jazz required new approaches to musical analysis; critics had “to bend the rules adhered to by classical music critics in order to convey the essence of the peculiar dynamism of jazz composition and performance.” The resulting writing was marked by a new “fluidity and continuity of language” that would resonate in rock journalists’ style. Jazz writers also displayed a “sense of energy and enthusiasm and the feeling of having really stumbled upon something refreshing and new,” a tone that would endure in pop criticism.

As the 1930s began, the number of periodicals devoted to jazz grew, providing an outlet to young writers with “no entry to intellectually geared periodicals and no credibility with general interest and specialized and society-

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid, 120.
conscious organs.” Much like early rock fan magazines, most were filled with writing that fell short of meaningful criticism. The two most prominent of these magazines, Downbeat and Metronome, set the industry standard for popular music magazines by publishing two types of writing: long critical essays and record reviews.

In their pages and on their covers, both magazines alienated black audiences by demonstrating a clear preference for white musicians and composers over black. This racial bias was unsurprising since most of the writers for jazz magazines were white. Although African American communities resonated with the sounds of jazz, black writers produced little of jazz’s criticism in the 1920s. As Amiri Baraka wrote in his 1960 essay “Jazz and the White Critic,” “Most jazz critics have been white Americans, but most important jazz musicians have not been…there are only two or three fingers’ worth of Negro critics or writers on jazz.” He believed that the black middle class that might normally produce such wanted to distance themselves from the culture that jazz represented. He wrote of the black middle class’s “desire to


45 Welburn in The Oxford Companion to Jazz, 751.

46 Welburn in The Oxford Companion to Jazz, 749.


48 Welburn, “Jazz Criticism,” 749.

become vague, featureless, Americans.” 50 He believed that the dearth of black jazz critics resulted from the feeling that “[j]azz was collected among the numerous skeletons the middle-class black man kept locked in the closet of his psyche, along with watermelons and gin, and whose rat ding caused him no end of misery and self-hatred.” 51 Baraka encouraged the development of an aesthetic theory of the music from within the community, but his exhortation did not come until decades after the peak of jazz’s popularity.

The people who did write jazz criticism did so from outside of the culture that produced the music. John Gennari writes, “the voices loudest in public praise of the art belong to men hailing from social stations far removed from that of the artists.” 52 Although early rock criticism had a similar lack of racial and socio-economic diversity, it differed in that its most influential critics all came from within the rock community.

Many white critics responded to vernacular music’s encroachment on classical music’s cultural prominence by sharpening the borders of artistic respectability. “Condemnation by analogy became a favorite sport,” according to Levine. “Jazz, various critics insisted, bore the same relationship to classical music as a limerick did to poetry, or a farmhouse to a cathedral, or a burlesque show to

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Gennari, 22.
legitimate drama.” Each of these sets of opposites clearly stated that jazz was the inferior “Other” to classical music. This polarization between high and low, genteel and vernacular, was a long tradition in the critical discipline, but cultural authorities railing against jazz took it to a new extreme. Levine elaborates:

At approximately the same time, two new words—or more accurately, two older words with new meanings—came into general usage. Their dual appearance is significant because the two—Culture and Jazz—helped to define one another. That is, they served as convenient polar points, as antitheses. One could understand what Culture was by looking at the characteristics of jazz and reversing them. Jazz was raucous, discordant; Culture was harmonious, embodying order and reason. Jazz was accessible, spontaneous; Culture was exclusive, complex, available only through hard study and training. 

The same dichotomization affected the reception of rock and roll. Although the separation between high and pop culture was less distinct in consumers’ lives than in theory, it was still an impediment to the acceptance of rock by many, especially cultural commentators and authorities.

Traditional critics’ efforts to shore up a familiar cultural hierarchy would ultimately harm what they meant to defend. Instead of securing their cultural preeminence, their polarizing rhetoric made classical music seem increasingly elitist and unfriendly. Joseph Horowitz agrees, describing the interwar period as the moment when “reverence degenerate[d] into a species of snobbery [and] sacralization turned into a popular movement, a midculture, rejecting contemporary


54 Ibid.
culture, enshrining dead European masters and celebrity performers.”55 This opened
the way for popular styles to dominate the musical culture.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as new types of popular music gained traction with
the public, jazz began its slow retreat from cultural prominence to smoke-filled
basement clubs and the pages of specialty magazines. Nonetheless, writers like Nat
Hentoff and Ralph Gleason, both of whom wrote for the special-interest magazine
_Downbeat_, the _New York Times_, and the _New York Post_, continued the jazz criticism
tradition. Hentoff and Gleason men would serve as mentors to burgeoning rock
critics, bridging the gap between jazz and rock writing. Gleason would be the most
prominent writer to move from professional jazz criticism to rock criticism, bridging
the gap between the two forms popular music criticism.

Despite the eventual acceptance and appreciation of jazz by mainstream
culture and the musical establishment, overall, critics’ attitudes toward popular
music remained much the same as they had been before jazz criticism existed.”

Historian John Cawelti writes, “By the mid-twentieth century, intellectuals were
more inclined to fear that the lower culture of the people was oozing out from below
and threatening to drown the best that has been thought and said in a flood of
ephemeral and trivial garbage.”56 A new era of mass consumption meant that more
popular culture was being pumped out than ever before. This increased presence and

55 Horowitz, 252.

56 John Cawelti, "Popular Culture: Coming of Age?" _Journal of Aesthetic
concomitant influence meant that pop forms, which were already treated with disdain became increasingly alarming to those who were fearful of their cultural effects. Rock journalists would soon take advantage of this cultural upheaval, championing the style before a public who needed guidance in the face of this confusing onslaught.

Like jazz, rock and roll came from the lowest ranks of American society, originating in the African American community and becoming infused with influences from the rural South and the urban North. And much like jazz, it was demeaned by critics and others as degraded, savage, empty, and even annoying. Often, cultural observers and authorities feared the music and particularly its effects on the youth. It took fifteen years from the first stirrings of rock and roll for serious critical writing about the genre to debut. There were many factors involved in why it took so long for such writing to appear and why it appeared when it did.

To judge whether its critics did justice to their subject, understanding the nature of rock music is foundational. Each of the writers discussed in the following chapters showed a keen interest in the history of rock music, using it often as a framing reference for their assessments of new music’s worth and place in the form’s pantheon. They also engaged to a large degree in trying to write that history, a particularly influential act at a time before rock had its first dedicated historians. Although each had their own views of what was most important in its story, they each understood its basic shape. Rock history is rich and complicated, and books like John Covach’s *What’s That Sound: An Introduction to Rock and Its History* and Paul
Friedlander’s *Rock and Roll: A Social History* provide a more comprehensive overview of the subject than falls within the scope of this dissertation.

Rock and roll music dates to the 1950s, with the first rock and roll songs appearing in 1953, and entering the mainstream by 1955.57 The earliest rock and roll songs were just versions of R&B that was “‘cleaned up’ a bit to make them suitable for radio stations directed to a white audience.”58 From rhythm and blues came rock ‘n’ roll’s perceived sense of danger, which carried over even as this shift occurred. To kids in the fifties, “rhythm and blues…seemed exotic, dangerous, and sexual in ways that excited them; they knew their parents would find this music unsettling or worse.”59 Contained within their embrace of the music was a fixation on the otherness or outsider qualities of black culture, and the idea that that was transferrable to white fans through black music or white versions of black music.

From the beginning, rock ‘n’ roll had a problematic relationship with black culture, because it was an appropriated form that was deracinated to appeal to white people. While many rock ‘n’ roll songs were penned and performed by white artists, many came directly from R&B. In addition to crossover hits—songs that charted on both the R&B and pop charts—many rock ‘n’ roll hits during the 1950s were R&B songs that were covered by white artists for white audiences, while their black


58 Covach, 60.

59 Covach, 61.
originators went unacknowledged and undercompensated. Questioning and negotiating this complicated legacy was a concern of the best critics.

The racial context is essential to understanding how rock music developed as well as its place in American culture. Friedlander writes, “Adult antagonism toward rock music also reflected the inherent racism of the era. Having correctly perceived rock music as fundamentally black in both origin and nature, most white parents judged it bestial and subhuman.” 60 Meanwhile, fans of the music fetishized and co-opted black culture. Within the black community, rock and roll was written of differently than in the white press. Notices about rock ‘n’ roll in black publications were common from 1955, and by 1956, several black newspapers had semi-regular coverage of the music. Although these columns were not criticism as much as entertainment announcements, the tone of them was markedly different from non-black sources.

The Pittsburgh Courier had a column called “Izzy Rowe’s Note Book” that gave coverage to rock ‘n’ roll beginning in 1956. Mostly celebrity gossip and entertainment news, the column’s discussions of rock included more frank discussions of the role of race in rock’s reception than the white press would give it for years. In July of 1956, Rowe wrote,

The Bill Haley Rock ‘n’ Roll show has been running into all sorts of racial and rowdy difficulties during their current tour of the South. In Birmingham, Ala., they were picketed by White Citizens Council members carrying signs which read “Rock ‘n’ Roll breeds integration,” “Why must we have Negro

music?” and “Bebop is Communism…In Greensville, S.C., the performers put on one show, and then were rushed from the theater because the management received word that a bomb had been planted in the house set to go off at 10. The rumor turned out to be untrue, but everybody was a nervous wreck!"\(^1\)

The audience for the show was white, but the tensions it sparked were real and terrifying to a black population accustomed to racial violence. The Chicago Defender reported on the same incident, writing, “Most of the audience were teenagers who seemed to consider the picketing a laugh.”\(^2\) The situation was not a laughing matter to the black readership of these publications, who lived with the dangerous upheaval caused by the cultural collision.

The approach to the music in white publications was different. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in June of 1956 of a ban on rock and roll dances in Santa Cruz, quoting a police representative at length. The article reported, “They say its heavy, pounding beat leads its fans to ‘highly suggestive, stimulating and tantalizing motions’…that ‘excited the crowd to passion at times.’”\(^3\) Columbia University’s Dr. A. M. Meerio warned, “If we cannot stem the tide of rock and roll with its waves of rhythmic narcosis and vicarious craze, we are preparing our own downfall in the

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1 Izzy Rowe’s Notebook, June 9, 1956.


midst of pandemic funeral dances.” It was blamed for everything from disrespectful attitudes to riots and juvenile delinquency. It was largely viewed as a social ill rather than a valuable cultural form. However, while railing against the form, its detractors failed to understand what the music meant to its young fans. It wasn’t just a mode of rebellion, though it certainly was that, but it was also a means of group identification and self-expression for millions of young Americans.

Racial prejudices were at the heart of many dismissals of the music and much of its sense of danger, coming as it did from black America. But derision also resulted from what Marshall McLuhan would later name the generation gap. Young people who grew up with the music would be its first critics, largely because older people had a hard time assimilating it. Rock and roll was alarming to the older generation. Simply listening to it “could…be an act of social rebellion,” a way teens could assert their independence and difference from their parents.

Paul Friedlander writes in *A Social History of Rock and Roll*, “some youth, emboldened by the rising expectations of America’s economic and political successes, sought and found a life different from the one portrayed on television’s Father Knows Best and Leave It to Beaver.” In their attempts to differentiate


65 Ibid.

66 Friedlander, 20.
themselves from their parents’ generation, they became a cohesive group in their rebellion against what they perceived the status quo.

Despite the parental outrage about juvenile delinquency, most teen rock and roll fans in the 1950s did not behave much differently than previous generations. It was a symbolic rebellion only. Social historians Don Hibbard and Carol Kaleialoha write, “In essence, rock and roll provided its predominantly middle-class audience with a vent for its discontent, a form of excitement, and a sense of group identity, while it pursued socially prescribed goals.”67 Their process of identity creation was as much about what it was opposed to as what it was for, and this generational antagonism continued to be an essential part of rock and roll culture, even as the generations in question changed over time. Rock and roll critics incorporated dissent into their writing, speaking both to and for their own more politically active generation in language that was couched in oppositional terms.

Over the course of the 1950s, rock and roll’s controversial R&B origins were joined by sounds borrowed from country and western music, rockabilly, and Tin Pan Alley. These came together to create more hybridized iteration of rock ‘n’ roll by the late 1950s. Unlike earlier rock ‘n’ roll, which was essentially sanitized R&B, over time the music’s content was aimed specifically at a teen audience; the songs revolved around topics that appealed to its young listeners, like cars, dating, and

school. Friedlander identifies two periods of what he terms “classic rock” in the fifties, writing,

The first group, reflecting its proximity to Black musical roots presented a relatively uncensored view of life around them—songs of a rebellious and of a sexual nature. The second generation’s songs of courtship and rejection lacked the seditious and libidinous edge of their predecessors… The first generation fashioned the music, forging the music’s crossover to the popular charts. Elvis and his second generation progeny appeared, capitalized on the previous inroads, reframed the musical form, and collected the fruits of classic rock’s labor.68

By the second generation of classic rock, the genre was already moving away from its R&B roots toward an ever more dilute version of the music. Market factors were a large part of this shift, as the music industry sought to connect with their target audience of young people.

White, middle-class youth in the 1950s had an enormous amount of spending power, which was only increasing as more and more Baby Boomers became teenagers. These young people benefitted from post-World War Two prosperity, and as they spent their money it became apparent that they were a large and potentially lucrative target market. Because of America’s economic boom, many young people had disposable incomes like rarely before, and, because of increased household financial security, did not have to work to help support their families.69 Their attention turned to leisure time and their spending power quickly followed.

68 Friedlander, 60.
69 Ibid, 21.
Close behind were market forces intent on exploiting the cash cow. Allan Bloom, the influential cultural critic, wrote, “This rock business is perfect capitalism, supplying to demand and helping to create it.” Although Bloom displayed a generally priggish attitude toward the genre throughout his career, this assessment is accurate. The question of the appropriate relationship between commercialism, identity, and artistry is crucial to understanding the way rock critics thought about their subject. It is one of the central ideological conflicts of the genre, and thus a major preoccupation to the writers who sought to explain rock’s meaning in American society and culture. At the heart of this conflict is the question of authenticity.

Authenticity as an ideal is embodied in the notion that there is something inherently personal and emotional about expression in rock and roll music. This was not a new idea in rock and roll, although it took its own unique form with rock. There are many forces that can interfere with the perceived authenticity of a work, including commercial influences and social pressures. Because so much of the


71 David Savran connects the idea of authenticity to earlier rejections of consumerism, writing, “Then as now, highbrow work tends to be wrapped in mystique, trading on its purported authenticity and its refusal to succumb to the commodity form.” David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 60.
Sixties rock counterculture was associated with a rejection of capitalism, that was a major preoccupation for rock fans and critics.

When the influence of market forces is acknowledged, it threatens the romanticized idea of the music as a vehicle for honest, personal expression. In *Magic Carpet Ride: The Evolution of Rock 'n' Roll in American Prose Literature*, Charles Anderson Goldthwaite writes,

[The] development of any rock aesthetic requires that the critic be serious about some core aspect of the music, whether that be artistic merit, sincerity of emotion, or a seemingly reckless disregard for the dictates of the form itself. Authenticity thus becomes the currency of all rock aesthetics; rock value systems are always calibrated either in terms of nearness to an authentic standard or to an ethereal notion of purity.72

Realistically, rock music is and has always been a mixture of personal expression and commercial influences, but authenticity has been enshrined as the marker of the worthiest rock music. According to Stuart Hall, ‘The danger arises because we tend to think of culture forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the ‘popular.’73 The task of the astute music critic, then, is to tease out the interplay between the two.

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In their essay titled “Modeling Authenticity,” critical theorists Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan explain that authenticity is “a sign rather than as a quality, and like any sign it functions differentially and deferentially.”

Authenticity is essentially a relative term, with meanings that change with time and context. It can refer to music that avoids adulterating elements including commercial influences, social pressure, political pressure, and even considerations of fame. As a sign, rather than a concrete quality, it is up to the listener to decide what authenticity means to them, whether they are critics or lay fans.

However, critics’ interpretations of what authenticity means has far-reaching implications due to their amplified voices and authority. In his essay “Reconsidering Rock,” Keir Keightley calls authenticity “the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream,” and the “foundation on which rock’s sense of its own seriousness has been built.”

This led to the point, according to Mark Mazullo, where “‘authentic’ rock ’n' roll, as [some early rock critics] constructed it, should always convey a potent and unspoiled message.” The problem with this approach is that it presumes that such a thing exists. As Stuart Hall says, “there is no whole,

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authentic, autonomous ‘popular culture’ which lies outside the field of force of the relations of culture power and domination.”  

The apotheosis of authenticity of personal expression is a recurring theme in rock and roll, no matter how slippery the possibility of achieving “authenticity” may be. Purity in rock music is a chimera, but it is one that was enshrined in the genre as an ideal through the obsession with authenticity. Preoccupations with such qualities became even more prevalent in the 1960s, as rock fans began to take the music even more seriously than before.

Whereas in the fifties, rock ‘n’ roll inspired rebellion that mostly symbolic, in the Sixties, the music was tied to widespread social and political change. Several factors contributed to the shift from a token rebellion to a more substantial one. First was the changing nature of the music itself. Rock saw an infusion of political, socially-conscious content with the rise in popularity of folk music beginning around 1963, as exemplified by the early work of Bob Dylan. Around the same time, the Beatles-led British invasion made rock and roll more ubiquitous and ambitious than ever. The combination of the two developments elevated rock’s visibility and significance to new heights.

The second factor that made rock and roll a stronger cultural force were generational changes that came about as the baby boomers, reared on rock music in the 1950s, came of age in the 1960s. By their sheer numbers and spending power, they boosted their pop heroes to unprecedented levels of power and influence.

77 Stuart Hall in Samuel, 232.
Finally, the political climate of the 1960s created a high-stakes atmosphere as the civil rights movement, free speech movements, and the anti-war movement heated up, and rock and roll was radicalized, becoming a preferred method for expressing discontent in an era where discontent was exceptionally high. These factors added up to a swelling of rock and roll music’s influence, leading ultimately to the appearance of the form’s first critics in 1966.

The first factor in rock’s changing cultural role were changes in the music itself, whereby rock and roll became richer in content and more popular than ever before. By 1960, the “classic rock” era had ended. The early Sixties saw a broadening of styles on the pop charts. Soul music, producer-driven pop, girl groups, surf music, and even calypso were all vying with rock ‘n’ roll for pop fans’ attention.

Folk was one such genre that exploded in popularity in the early Sixties, with a rise in interest centered on college campuses. As audiences who were reared on early rock ‘n’ roll advanced into their college years and young adulthood, many sought out music with deeper meanings than before. Folk music provided the depth that many pop fans were looking for. Folk music had long historical connections with social and labor movements in the United States, and its lyrical traditions reflected that. The rise of political and social content in rock and roll was spurred by intersection of the folk revival with rock ‘n’ roll. This development is important for

78 Covach, 113-114.
the purposes of this dissertation because it was rock’s political and social content that became a central focus for many rock critics.

However, as with all cultural products, folk music was more complicated than it appeared at first glance. The folk music revival, like almost all pop music of the era, was carefully molded by the music industry to appeal to the youth demographic. Though there was a perception that it was more authentic than the pop that came before it (a perception that carried over into early rock critics’ writing), “the business mechanisms that marketed the music were often the same.”79 Thus, the content of much of the folk music that made it to pop radio remained “relatively safe and pleasant.”80 It was no purer of commercial influences or authentically working class than pop music. In “Modeling Authenticity,” Coyle and Dolan write,

Folk itself was formalized by commercial and semicommercial interests. Since its first articulations in the thirties, the very idea of folk music has been caught up in romantic ideas about ‘the folk,’ in expectations that it somehow voices the soul of that mythical political convenience, the common man. The expectation has been that folk music sounded from the bedrock of United States. The expectation has been that folk music sounded from the bedrock of U.S. culture, whereas pop is no more stable than the shifting sands of commercial fortune.81

Nonetheless, the authors admit, no other form “was more important for the shaping of rock discourse…[than] the ‘folk’ scene.”82 Folk values, however dilute, included

79 Ibid, 118.
80 Ibid.
81 Coyle and Dolan, 27.
82 Ibid.
lyrical content that was political richer and more literary than most contemporary rock ‘n’ roll, whose lyrics were still largely centered around cars, school, and teen romance.

The most important figure in the infusion of the folk lyric into rock was Bob Dylan, who permanently expanded the artistic boundaries of the form. Though he was initially deemed unmarketable by the recording industry, by 1963, Dylan had success on the pop charts with his folk songs about important issues like Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. 83 He wrote some of the first protest songs of the Sixties to make an impact on American culture, including the 1963 Peter, Paul, and Mary hit “Blowin’ in the Wind.” He became a visible symbol of the socially-conscious musical left, playing at voter registration drives in Mississippi and performing a song about slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Then in 1965, Dylan turned his talents from folk to rock. According to rock historian John Covach, this “break with the folk tradition…would have tremendous consequences for popular music.” 84 Dylan released his first electric album, Bringing It All Back Home that year, as well as a hit single, “Like A Rolling Stone.” Both are considered watershed works in the history of rock music, with their combination of poetic lyrics and hard, driving rock beats. Also in 1965, in a move that was symbolic

83 Covach, 118.
84 Covach, 189.
of his break with folk and turn to rock, Dylan plugged in his guitar and went electric at the Newport Jazz Festival, the banner event of the folk music calendar year. For this, he was viewed as a traitor by many people in the folk music community, who lamented that he had left them (and their causes) behind.

For rock and roll fans, on the other hand, Dylan became a standard bearer for the shift toward the enrichment of rock music’s themes and content that elevated its importance in its listeners lives.\(^85\) In *The 1960s Cultural Revolution,* John C. McWilliams writes, “The influence of [folk] music with a message, in which they grafted literary and social themes, helped transform [rock], as it also raised the collective consciousness of the younger generation, who began to view the world differently.”\(^86\) The move toward more meaningful content in rock that he represented became an essential part of rock critics’ work. Andy Warhol summed up his influence on his generation,

[When Dylan] switched from social protest songs to personal protest songs, and the more private he got, the more popular he got, and it seemed like the more he said, “I’m only me,” the more the kids said, “We’re only you, too.” If Dylan had just been a poet with no guitar, saying those same things, it wouldn’t have worked; but you can’t ignore poetry when it shoots into the Top Ten.\(^87\)

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\(^85\) Covach 188-191.


As a corollary to this idea, once pop began to rise to the level of poetry, it was only a matter of time before this new mode of expression developed its own critics. Where art goes, critics follow, and Dylan was the leader of the shift in rock toward more meaningful lyrical content that prompted the arrival of rock’s first critics.

Dylan’s influence was magnified when it reached the biggest rock and roll band the world has ever seen, the Beatles. When Beatlemania hit in 1964, it changed the face of rock and roll, as it became more ubiquitous than ever in the lives of the American youth. The Beatles were representative of another stream of changes that made the rock in the second half of the Sixties so culturally important, ultimately leading to the appearance of the first rock critics.

From Liverpool, England, the Beatles grew up idolizing the early R&B-based music of America’s classic rock period. The Beatles brought the energy and excitement of the earlier era’s rock and roll back to a languishing genre. Beatlemania pushed the band to heights of fame rivaled only by Elvis in his heyday, and rock exploded with sales. They were part of the larger British invasion; many other artists like the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and the Kinks also made indelible marks on American culture, but the Beatles led the pack.

In 1964, the Beatles began listening to Bob Dylan’s records, which it changed the course of their music. Because of their enormous influence and popularity, this development also had a lasting impact on much of the subsequent course of rock music in the 1960s. Inspired by Dylan, they began to experiment with more Avant-garde sounds and meaningful lyrics. As Paul McCartney said of their
music at the time, “We were trying to please Bob Dylan.” In 1965 they released *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*, and with them their metamorphosis into a new kind of rock band was obvious. These albums were artistic, experimental, and exhibited a broadened vision of what rock music could sound like.

1965 was a transformative year in rock music, as exemplified by Dylan and the Beatles, but reaching into all corners of the genre. It is no surprise therefore that the first rock criticism appeared only a year later in 1966, part of the wave of cultural change tied to the rising importance of rock music both artistically and socially. The changes they helped to initiate continued to gather momentum into 1966 and lasted through the entire decade. The rock critics examined here were each inspired by the newly artistic and influential music produced during this transformational era to pursue writing about it.

The second factor that contributed to rock music producing its first critics was a generational shift. It was in the 1960s that the first Baby Boomers began to come of age, and they formed the largest generation the United States had ever seen, constituting one-third of the population. David Farber calls them the “pig in the demographic python,” and by their sheer numbers they changed the way


89 For more on the Beatles’ early career, see Covach, 153-168.


91 Ibid, 1.
Americans lived, consumed, and thought about society. They were also a generation that was more affluent and optimistic than most. Their predecessors, sometimes called the Silent or Forgotten Generation, were born from the mid-twenties to the early forties, and the deprivations and traumas of those years instilled a more pessimistic and cautious approach to life in many of those who lived through them.92 “Their children, 76 million of them by 1960, born into a child-oriented society…were nurtured in the 1950s with no recollection of the hard times and sacrifices made by their parents,” writes cultural historian John C. McWilliams.93 Though the prosperity and security many boomers felt growing up did not extend to everyone, particularly minority groups like African Americans, the white middle class youths who made up the largest part of the rock and roll listening public were more comfortable than ever before.94

Meanwhile, white youths’ suburban material comfort brought the glaring inequalities of America’s consumerist society into full contrast as the civil rights movement progressed and led many young people to reject the status quo. “Baby boomers were far more numerous but much less passive than their parents’ generation,” writes Klaus B. Fischer, and the combination of their numbers with

93 McWilliams, 11.
their increasing activism made them a powerful societal force. Movements with their starts in the 1950s, including the civil rights movement and the bohemian counterculture, sped up in the 1960s. The stakes were raised as the civil rights movement reached fever pitch. The Vietnam War threatened the lives of millions of young men. Political issues became increasingly relevant to youths.

Meanwhile, young people were attending college in record numbers, where they encountered new people and ideas. Edward P. Morgan explains,

"Universities brought unprecedented numbers of young people into an environment segregated by age, suspended in time and place, and focused on an intellectual encounter with critical minds. The dynamics of university life encouraged students to imagine and society freed from the inequities and imperatives of production and consumption." The ideas they were responding to were not new to the 1960s, but there was a confluence of events that led to young Americans’ increasing politicization, both on and off college campuses. Paul Friedlander writes, “Young people in the Sixties, building on rebellious behavior of the previous decade, created their own lifestyle, challenged the prevailing morality, and initiated an era of creativity and experimentation.” Rock and roll was a natural beneficiary of this shift, as a primary mode of artistic and personal expression for the Baby Boomers.

The music became a vehicle for expressions of discontent, awareness-raising, and a source of collective consciousness for a generation. Since it played such a

95 Ibid, 21.
97 Friedlander, 99.
strong part in bringing together millions of young people and influencing their ideas, having critics to explain the music and the role that it was playing in society became increasingly important. As the counterculture tried to “to reimagine and change the world through cultural means,”98 the need for corresponding cultural criticism grew.

In 1966, a seventeen-year-old rock and roll fan at Swarthmore College converted the sci-fi fanzine he published out of his basement into Crawdaddy!, creating the world’s first rock and roll magazine. At seventeen, his resources were limited in the beginning. The first two copies of Crawdaddy! were mimeographed by Williams himself, and the first six were folded and stapled by hand. It was truly an example of the do-it-yourself ethic of the burgeoning underground press at the time. Like the magazine itself, the articles in Crawdaddy! were less refined in the beginning than they would become as the Sixties progressed. Most of them in the early days were written by Williams himself, although it did not take long for his readers to begin chiming in with their own writing. Cultural historian Michael J. Kramer says of Williams’ work, “His writing could be clunky at times, but it was also full of keen observations, deep thinking, and passionate feeling about pop music.”99 Though the quality of the reporting and criticism would improve over the years, it always maintained a fanzine aesthetic rather than a more journalistic style.


But it was a place where rock fans could come together as a community around the music that meant so much to them and read writing about it from people who took it as seriously as they did. Soon, it would be joined by numerous other publications in this endeavor, but for several months in 1966, *Crawdaddy*! stood alone as the only outlet for people interested in serious writing about rock.

The field was wide open for a member of the youth movement, with all the vibrancy and enthusiasm of the era as well as its strong political commitments, to lead the long-overdue critical response to the genre. The rock critics who started the profession in 1966 and 1967 had little precedent to follow, and they faced resistance based on longstanding cultural biases in American culture. Despite the success of jazz in producing its own criticism, rock critics fought an uphill battle against preconceptions about cultural values and cultural hierarchies.

Rock itself was imbued with a spirit of rebellion from its earliest days, which terrified many adults. It was the preferred mode of expression for the largest generation the country had ever seen, and its influence became enormous. Meanwhile, changes in the genre over the early 1960s resulted in a form that was highly socially conscious. A literary sensibility was also imparted to the genre over the Sixties, resulting in a form that captured and conveyed the complex feelings, hopes, and fears of the Baby Boomer generation. As it became more important to its fans and in American culture, rock music developed its own, highly influential body of criticism. The pioneers of rock criticism entered an empty field, and their approaches to their work had resounding influence in the world of music and
beyond, having a transformative effect on what was considered valuable in American culture.
Chapter Three: Richard Goldstein

In 1966, a long-haired, bell-bottomed Columbia School of Journalism graduate, Richard Goldstein, stepped into a small editorial office at the *Village Voice* and declared, “I want to write about rock and roll. I want to be a rock critic.”¹ Dan Wolf, editor of the *Voice*, was baffled by the peculiar twenty-two-year old’s proposal. “What is that?” he asked. “What do you mean, write about rock and roll?”² Richard Goldstein says that Wolf “had no idea what [a rock critic] would be—and I didn’t either, actually. It didn’t exist.”³ Exhibiting the receptiveness to novelty that made his newspaper an incubator of the New Journalism literary movement, Wolf agreed to the startling pitch, green-lighting the first ever weekly column of rock criticism, “Pop Eye.”

During its short two-year run, “Pop Eye” vaulted Goldstein to renown as the nation’s foremost explainer of the rock-oriented counterculture. He became the go-to guy for magazines and newspapers across the country seeking to report on the changes sweeping America’s youth culture. Only a year after he debuted as a rock critic, he wrote the first rock and roll review ever featured in the *New York Times*. By the time he retired his “Pop Eye” column from the Village Voice in 1969, there

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² Ibid.
³ “It existed, as you know in little publications like *Crawdaddy!* (but) I had no idea that they existed.” Ibid.
were dozens of rock critics working for major publications across the country, all of whom were following along a path Goldstein had pioneered.

The only journalist of his kind at a time when “developments broke so fast, [no one] could absorb them, let alone insert them into the mind’s polarities of left/right, politics/culture, rational/irrational,” Goldstein’s faculty for grappling with the meanings of these changes publicly, candidly, and artfully made him a sensation.4 He guided fans and cultural tourists alike through the ever-shifting world of rock and roll music. He worked prolifically and for a wide range of publications. He wrote for popular, mainstream magazines like Life and major newspapers nationwide, but his home was at the more radical and avant-garde Village Voice. By publishing an enormous amount of work in a variety of outlets, he became a spokesman for the rock ‘n’ roll counterculture, explaining rock’s meanings to both its fans and the public and proclaiming its cultural value to a broader audience. Goldstein jokes that he was “the hardest working hippie in New York.”5 In 1967, the Los Angeles Times called Goldstein “the Secretary-General of the Pop Culture.”6

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5 In the time that he was writing rock journalism, Goldstein wrote pieces for the New York Times, Village Voice, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Boston Globe, Vogue, Mademoiselle, Travel and Camera, Life, Newsweek, Harper’s Magazine, New York Magazine, and Holiday, among other publications, meaning his work reached the wide-ranging audiences of these varying magazines. (Goldstein, interview.)

His approach to rock criticism had a huge resonance within his field, not only because he was the first to do it, but also because of how he did it. His style and taste set a standard for the genre, and his cultural approach was challenging and politically motivated. Goldstein was an adherent of the New Journalism school of writing, so his work was intensely subjective, experimental, and focused on relating scenes, feelings, and experiences to the reader. This heightened the relatability of his stories, an important goal of Goldstein’s as he worked to create a community of rock fans through his writings. This imagined community paralleled the real rock community that Goldstein gradually moved to the center of. Goldstein, who had always felt like an outsider in his life, found a home in the fold of the counterculture. His writings reflected his sense of belonging and extended an invitation to his readers to join the global community of rock fans, even if it was only through his columns.

In addition to working to bring rock fans together, he tried to bridge the gap between fans, who were mostly young people, and rock’s older detractors. He thought of rock’s reception in terms of a wide generational gulf, and many of his efforts focused on narrowing that divide through thought-provoking examinations of its social, cultural, and artistic context intended to challenge preconceptions about the music. By transforming the way rock was addressed in the media and relentlessly promoting its importance, he helped push it further into the mainstream of American culture. In his choice of style, subject, and approach, he displayed a desire to make the rock culture more democratic and accessible. He changed the conversation about rock and roll, effecting not only how it was discussed, but also where, why, and for
whose benefit. However, by the time he began to see his efforts at gaining widespread recognition and respect for the genre pay off, he felt repelled by the cooptation and commercialization that accompanied its accessibility.

Behind all his efforts lay a political motive. Goldstein considered his work part of the cultural wing of the youth revolution. When he began working as a critic, Goldstein came to the profession with strong ideological commitments that shaped his approach. He was a radical with a rebellious streak, and he believed strongly in the power of music to change society. Although his politics and style would evolve over his career, he had a strong point of view and radical voice from the beginning. As changes in the counterculture, then New Left, and the American political climate made a positive transformation in the country seem less and less likely, Goldstein ceased to believe in the revolutionary power of rock and roll. The personal, political, cultural, and professional aspects of Goldstein’s life were so tied up together that when one strand unraveled, the rest of them did too. He became personally bereft and left his position as the Village Voice’s rock critic. The fact that he put so much of himself into his work that made it so vital and evocative of the time in which he lived, but it also made it difficult to sustain.

Goldstein’s personal background and intellectual development were major factors in how he wrote, and thus what legacy he left. He got his working-class ethics and Marxist politics from his childhood in a Bronx housing project. On the other hand, he developed a lingering sense of alienation from the mainstream of American society during his youth, as he felt isolated from his neighbors by his
intellectualism, cultural interests, and, particularly, his homosexuality. As a teen, he found inspiration in the pages of the *Village Voice*, and later a refuge in the bohemian culture of the East Village it came from.

In the early Sixties, the emergence of a new era of rock music prompted by the British Invasion gave Goldstein a focus for his passion for culture, and his involvement in the New Left protest movements added a political edge to his engagement with music. Meanwhile, his introduction to the New Journalism gave him an exciting and innovative writing style through which to express his increasingly radical cultural ideas. While the New Journalism provided the mode for his expression, writers like Susan Sontag gave him the language to express his ideas about the changing nature of popular culture and its consumption. Each of these factors influenced Goldstein’s worldview, culminating in his determination to become the first rock critic. These influences also helped shape rock criticism moving forward, not only because they were vital parts of the cultural zeitgeist, but also because, as its first practitioner, Goldstein’s influence on the genre was great. A look at his personal, political, and intellectual development contextualizes not only what he set out to do as the first rock critic, but why he thought the endeavor was important.

Most of the background that follows comes from an oral history conducted for this dissertation in 2011. Much of the information conveyed in that interview has since been recounted in Goldstein’s 2015 memoir, *Another Little Piece of My Heart: My Life of Rock and Revolution in the ’60s*. In both the interview by the author and
his autobiography, Goldstein draws strong connections between his personal experiences and his professional goals, both inextricable elements of his development as a critic.

Richard Goldstein was a born New Yorker, just squeaking into the baby-boomer generation with his June 19, 1944 birth. Both of his parents, Jack and Mollye Goldstein, were first-generation Americans who grew up among other Eastern European immigrants in the slums of the Lower East Side. Because Mollye and Jack’s childhoods were marked by the poverty of tenement life, they felt privileged when, early in their marriage, they garnered a coveted spot in one of New York City’s earliest public housing projects, the Vladeck Houses. For them, public housing was a big step up. When they relocated to another housing project in the Bronx when Goldstein was six, he recalls, “My father regarded it as moving to the country, because it was adjacent to Bronx Park.”7 Growing up in a working-class household and neighborhood had a profound effect on Goldstein’s personal and intellectual development.

He had trouble fitting in with many of his neighbors. The exceptions were what he considered other outsiders, “children of the Commies. They weren’t Communists, but they were certainly into music and politics and all that, and they became my friends.”8 Goldstein recalls becoming enamored with leftist politics as

7 Richard Goldstein, email message to author, June 2, 2011.
8 Goldstein, Interview.
early as junior high school, attending a civil rights march in 1956 where Harry Belafonte spoke to a crowd of 5,000. Goldstein began to develop deep convictions about social justice, as well as a streak of anti-authoritarianism. He observed the alienating effect of radicalism as he watched his Communist neighbors deal with the fear of the Red Scare-era witch hunts. Alienation was a feeling the young man already knew well, and would struggle with throughout his life and career.

For Goldstein, the cause of his emotional isolation was not only his nascent political radicalism. Nor was it his self-consciousness about being short and overweight, although these facts caused him plenty of angst. A major reason for his feelings of loneliness and difference were caused by his nascent homosexuality. Although he wouldn’t come out as gay until the 1970s, Goldstein describes himself in his youth as a “crypto-queer.” Although he still “had no idea what they added up to,” Goldstein’s intensifying homosexual feelings and experiences were psychologically wrenching for him. Struggling to come to terms with his sexuality in a neighborhood that was “very rigid” in its homophobia left him wary and even fearful of his neighbors.

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
Life in the Bronx difficult for Goldstein, but, he recalls, “at least I had the subway, I could go down to the Village.”14 His feelings of being a misfit drove him to seek refuge in a quarter that had served just such a function for thousands before him. As an adolescent, he “would cross the entire Bronx to go the one news stand that carried” the Village Voice, which shone to him like a cultural beacon from across the city.15 In its pages, Goldstein “picked up culture.” In his career at the Voice he would strive to emulate this function for his own readers.16 His acculturation accelerated as the paper inspired him to begin making regular trips to Greenwich Village in his teens.17 Reinventing himself in a fashion that would never fly in his own rough-and-tumble neighborhood, he imagined himself “a young Dostoyevsky” and began to call himself an “extensionalist.”18 Like a hipster Clark Kent, he would quickly change into his Beatnik uniform in the subway station upon arriving in the Village from the Bronx.19

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Extensionalism is an epistemic philosophy that questions the fixity of meanings. Not to be confused with Existentialism.
19 Throughout his college years, Goldstein continued “migrating down to the Village whenever [he] could.” Just as he had throughout his high school years, he continued to model himself after the Village’s fashions. Soon, he was no longer an extensionalist, but a bona fide folkie—complete with experience as a kazoo player in a jug band. (Goldstein, interview.)
Goldstein was someone for whom a sense of acceptance in a community was important, having grown up with the feeling of being an outsider. This need became a driving force in his life, as he sought communities in which he could feel comfortable being himself. He felt so estranged from his neighbors by his queerness, radical leanings, and cultural interests that when he finally did find a refuge in the bohemian haven of Greenwich Village, it quickly became a vital part of his life.

When describing social forces that shaped his career as a rock writer, Goldstein points squarely to the dual influences of the Bronx and the Village as the key to his cultural perspective. They gave him “this background that was one foot in rock and the other in folk music, really involving two different classes of people—one working class and the other middle class.”

Still envisioning himself as a “young Dostoyevsky,” Goldstein entered Hunter College in 1962 as an English major who intended to write fiction. His literary interests from this time would wield a significant influence on Goldstein’s critical style. By the mid-Sixties, Goldstein’s interests had turned to the transgressive style of writing known as the New Journalism. Robert S. Boynton explains the principles of the style:

The New Journalism uses complete dialogue, rather than the snippets quoted in daily journalism; proceeds scene by scene, much as in a movie; incorporates varying points of view, rather than telling a story solely from the perspective of the narrator; and pays close attention to status details about the

20 Ibid.
appearance and behavior of its characters. Rigorously reported, the New Journalism reads ‘like a story.’

According to practitioner Tom Wolfe, the New Journalism was about “experimenting with all the devices of realism, revving them up, trying to use them in a bigger way, with the full passion of innocents and discoverers.”22 In a simpler definition, to paraphrase Norman Mailer, the New Journalism was “history as fiction, fiction as history.”

For Goldstein, the New Journalism meant experimentation with subjectivity, as he began to create “journalistic sketches” with himself at the center.24 Goldstein recalls, “I thought of myself as a storyteller... I was going to tell stories the way I would when writing a piece of fiction, but everything in it was going to be real... In the New Journalism, the reporter is present in the story. It’s like... Whitman, ‘I am the man, I suffered, I was there.’”25 Goldthwaite sums up the genre:

The New Journalism describes a writing style that emerged following World War II that combines a journalistic or historical coverage of events with a personalized reporting style. The traditional journalist’s impartiality toward his or her subject matter was replaced with a distinctive narrative voice; New


22 Tom Wolfe, quoted in Reporting the Counterculture by Richard Goldstein (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), xvii.


24 Goldstein, interview.

25 Goldstein, interview.
By emphasizing personal experience and subjectivity, the New Journalism allowed Goldstein to make a heightened connection with the culture he wrote about, which meant that fans and outsiders alike looked to his work as a guide to the rock world.

Goldstein began “writing about what was around [him] at the time” in the New Journalism style, focusing especially the snowballing youth subculture. It was important to him, and he thought that it was also important for kids to have an outlet for their interests, as he had the Voice when he was growing up. But he also wanted to relate to non-fans. He looked to “Wolfe’s criterion—his standard for a good story: the reader should come away marveling, “Do you believe people live like this?” Like Wolfe, he immersed himself in the subcultures he reported on, but Goldstein was more emotionally committed to the world he reported from than Wolfe, who was an observer more than a participant. The result was work that was intimately tied to Goldstein’s sense of self, for better or worse.

In addition to blurring the lines between reporter and subject, the cutting-edge New Journalism style “rocked my assumptions about the boundary between fact and fiction,” wrote Goldstein in 1989:

It was enough to make a young writer abandon the dream of becoming a novelist. I began to write strange crossover essays, usually about the subject that obsessed me then, rock ’n’ roll. I had always loved the music; even as an

26 Goldthwaite, 27.
27 Goldstein, interview.
28 Goldstein, Reporting the Counterculture, xvii.
alienated adolescent taking refuge in Dos Passos and Salinger, I savored Dion and the Shirelles…I could think of no better way to touch the music and describe the process by which it was rousing the sleeping giant of my generation than through prose that could incorporate the mythmaking power of fiction and the credibility of reportage.29

Goldstein was inspired to become a journalist and he entered Columbia School of Journalism in the fall of 1964 on a fellowship. He began writing stories about youth culture that were “infused with the breathless tropes of …Wolfe, who was then the Great Satan of journalism schools.”30 Indeed, he was so obsessed that after completing each new story, he would sit down and compare it to Wolfe’s work.31 Goldstein’s professors were “baffled and horrified” by the results.32 “I don’t know what this is,” one wrote on a Goldstein submission, “but you still owe us a story.”33

Wolfe wasn’t the only strong influence on Goldstein’s writing now. During Goldstein’s time in graduate school, Susan Sontag was publishing a series of essays that challenged Goldstein with their anti-authoritarian stance and reconsiderations of cultural value. Sontag, only a decade older than Goldstein, was his hero and “a great influence” on his thinking. She wrote her paradigm-shifting essay “Notes on Camp” in 1964, just as Goldstein began his training as a journalist. Printed in the leftist

29 Goldstein, Reporting the Counterculture, xvii.
30 Goldstein, interview.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
Partisan Review, it focused on cultural appreciation beyond that of traditional high culture. “Based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement,” Sontag laid the ideological foundation for a generation’s cultural rebellion.\footnote{Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 298.} Goldstein, who abhorred what he considered cultural authorities’ elitist attitudes, attributes to Sontag his “ideological commitments to the common,” commitments that would lead him to challenge traditional cultural hierarchies and champion popular taste; both became hallmarks of his work specifically and rock journalism generally.\footnote{Goldstein, interview.}

Goldstein’s mission was not to do away with cultural hierarchy, which is simply the way in which society organizes its cultural productions. He never proposed that all cultural productions were equal; indeed, central to his critical task was sifting through musical offerings and discerning what was worthy of his audience’s time and what was not. Rather, he thought that dismissing certain cultural products as a matter of form was unreasonable and based on factors other than merit.

As Lawrence Levine writes in Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, “We need to make distinctions within culture as within every other realm of human endeavor… the immediate question is less whether we should employ hierarchical categories than whether we should employ frozen categories
ripped out of the contexts in which they were created.”36 The problem was, Goldstein believed, that “because something is rock, it takes a certain position in the cultural hierarchy.”37 So, he encouraged an approach that was unfettered by such prejudices against popular musical styles.

Goldstein argued that a new paradigm of musical consideration was necessary to suit a new mass consumer age and the generation of artists and fans that had grown up alongside it. Cultural hierarchy—the way in which society organizes its cultural products—needed shaking up and reforming, just like the other institutions under assault by Sixties radicals. Goldstein believed that the greatest poets and artists of his generation were going unheralded because cultural institutions were unwilling to look outside of traditional art forms. For Goldstein, this was unacceptable, a disservice to the artists and art itself. Believing that “a blues song is as complicated as a piece by Bach,” Goldstein felt compelled to “burst…hierarchies of culture” and replace them with more responsive ways of assessing music, suited to the rapidly shifting realities of American mass media.38

Acting as a cultural, social, and media critic as a well as a music critic, Goldstein took his work and his position very seriously, particularly when it came to representing rock fans.

36 Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 7-8.
37 Goldstein, interview.
38 Goldstein, interview.
Providing him with the tools to challenge the dominant culture, Sontag encouraged young critics, including Goldstein, to examine and uncover the “assumptions underlying certain judgments and tastes.” Sontag believed that not doing so was having a dangerously limiting effect on artistic production. She wrote, “we have an obligation to overthrow any means of defending and justifying art which becomes particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs and practice.” Sontag worried that in limiting conceptions of worthy art to high-minded, serious, or moral productions, one might “in the constant exercise of his good taste…eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak.” Sontag argued that a creative work that imparts enjoyment and pleasure should be as highly prized as one that achieves “seriousness and dignity.” For Goldstein, the importance of Sontag’s work was that it provided him with a guide for an more responsive understanding of pop music than the timeworn and generationally-divisive arguments against rock that had dominated the media for the past decade.

Though kids had always enjoyed the music despite the critical backlash, he felt that the music deserved a serious critic. Sontag’s work was critical to this enterprise because her ideas that gave him the critical tools and language to approach a denigrated form from a fresh perspective. He committed to challenging the cultural

39 Sontag, 287.
40 Ibid, 5.
41 Ibid, 291.
42 Ibid, 287.
status quo, and this commitment became the overriding theme in nearly all of Goldstein’s work. He wasn’t just reporting; he was lobbying for institutional and cultural change. Part of his approach included direct assaults on the cultural hierarchy, but it also meant highlighting the artistic possibilities of rock.

There was also a more overtly political component to his rock writing. Goldstein had been involved in activism from his early teens, particularly civil rights activism. In high school, he joined protests of businesses with racist hiring practices and got sprayed with buckshot at a protest against White Castle for refusing to hire black people. He rode a bus from the Bronx to Washington D.C. to attend the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In college, he joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a prominent civil rights group, and became very involved in the organization, providing boots on the ground at numerous protests. In addition, like many others of his generation, he was inspired and radicalized by the emergence of the Free Speech Movement and the subsequent anti-war movement that grew out of it.

He describes his worldview at the time as being informed by “the ideology of the New Left, which [was] that we’re all workers in the revolution,” and that made him “interested in leveling the field.”43 If, as Goldstein believed, rockers were

43 Goldstein, interview. Stanley Aronowitz writes in Roll over Beethoven: The Return of Cultural Strife, “I interpret the culture wars, not merely in the ideological terms in which they are framed, but in connection with the breakup of the old knowledge paradigms that have been ineluctably linked to economic and state institutions. Along the way, I find strange allies acting as gatekeepers for the established culture. From these alliances, I have concluded that the old definitions of ‘left’ and ‘right’ barely apply to cultural struggles.” (Stanley Aronowitz, Roll Over
“music workers” doing their part for the movement through cultural productions, then his music criticism could be a part of the cultural side of the revolution as well. He wanted to imbue his criticism with political meaning, and he accomplished this by focusing on the aspects of the musical culture that were connected to political and social change. The approaches he employed to accomplish this were varied—from starting letter-writing campaigns to sneaking into illegal East German rock clubs, and even reporting from the center of the DNC protests in 1968—but his goal was always the same: to shine a light on the important role that rock and roll was playing in the youth revolution.

His New Left commitments gave a direction to his longstanding leftist ideology, and he believed that cultural radicalism was an essential part of the broader changes he and others of his generation hoped to see in America. Susan Sontag gave him the tools to pursue new ways of thinking about culture, and the New Journalism gave him the expressive techniques that suited his nontraditional approach to music criticism. These influences were foundational to Goldstein’s work as a critic, and because he was the first to do what he did, they became a part of rock journalism in general. His style, including his choice of subjects, the way approached them, and

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Beethoven: The Return of Cultural Strife, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, 9.) On the one hand, Aronowitz is correct in asserting that the cultural hierarchy during the Sixties needs serious historical reconsideration. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that Goldstein was thinking in class terms when approaching Sontag’s work, and subsequently when applying her ideas to his critical writings.

44 Goldstein, interview.
the language that he used, reflected his commitment to a more respectful approach to rock than had ever been taken before. For him, the music’s working-class roots, racial complexities, and mass appeal were aspects of the genre to be celebrated, not viewed with suspicion or disdain. His dedication to championing popular music was part of a broader democratic impulse, which resulted in a bottom-up approach to musical appreciation that challenged the classism of a musical establishment that he believed was elitist.

Shortly after his graduation from Columbia in 1966, with these critical tools and radical ideas fresh in his mind, Goldstein convinced the *Village Voice* to hire him as the world’s first weekly rock critic. He debuted “Pop Eye” in June, earning him the distinction of being “the true inventor of rock criticism.”\(^{45}\) Because, as the pioneer, there were no rock critics for him to look to as models, Goldstein says he was “making this up out of whole cloth.”\(^{46}\) Thus, he brought a lot of himself and his personal ideology to the endeavor. How he wrote about music, why he wrote about it the way he did, what aspects of the music he chose to write about, and where he wrote about it all factor into the lasting influence his work had on how critics think and talk about rock music. He was also instrumental in making the music a part of the national conversation, and not just in the breathless encomiums of adoring fans or the grumbling of disapproving authority figures.

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46 “It existed, as you know in little publications like *Crawdaddy!* (but) I had no idea that they existed.” Goldstein, interview.
The Village Voice, the very publication that had inspired him as a young teen, was the perfect vehicle for his column. The periodical’s leftist orientation and unorthodox editorial style suited Goldstein’s approach. The Voice had built an impressive reputation on its nontraditional reporting, giving new and innovative writers like Goldstein their big breaks. This editorial style owed as much to financial difficulties as it did to aesthetic principles. Undiscovered writers worked for less money than known ones, so the publication was willing to take gambles on unproven talent. It was on the cutting edge of journalism, largely due to the resulting unconventional rapport between its editors and writers. To attract inventive and interesting writers, the editors “had to be prepared to publish what writers wanted to write. So, on the one hand, the Voice was under-edited; but on the other hand, it got material that no other publication did, because no other paper would have attracted it or known what to do with it.” Goldstein’s “Pop Eye” was one such misfit that found a home there.

The laissez-faire relationship between the editors and the staff was the crux of the Voice’s belletristic success, and one of the reasons it became an incubator for the unconventional New Journalism style. Writers were encouraged to pursue their own personal styles, with their completed submissions being edited only for

47 The Voice struggled financially throughout its early years, only reaching solvency in 1967.


49 Ibid.
grammar. “It was very direct,” Goldstein recalls. “It was a great writing teacher because it was completely unmediated. There was no intervention.”50 In his experience, the editors would “like your ideas and your approach and then they’d hire you and let you go.”51 Dan Wolf, writes Voice chronicler Kevin McAuliffe, “edited people, not copy.”52 For Goldstein, this situation was very appealing. He recalls that because “it kept mediation at a minimum, the reader and the writer communicated as directly as print allowed.”53

His relatable style came through in the language that he used in his “Pop Eye” pieces. According to Farber, some people, including Goldstein, showed their difference from the establishment voices by adopting a “hip patois—a language redolent with ‘you knows,’ all-purpose signifiers like ‘groovy’ and ‘cool,’ and swarms of images that aimed to share an experience rather than to state a position.”54 Goldstein recalls, “I tried to invent a language, a rhetoric, that actually captured

50 Goldstein, interview.
51 Goldstein, interview.
52 McAuliffe quoted in Menand, “Village.” Menand says that so important were the personalities and mentalities of the Village Voice’s writers to the paper’s approach that the primary mode of editorial intervention came from Wolf’s habit of psychoanalyzing his writers, sitting them down for long talks about their inner selves and offering them nuggets of wisdom in return.
53 Ibid.
54 Goldstein, interview.
[and] duplicated the experience. I tried to develop a style that actually reflected what I was seeing.”

Goldstein explains that his initial goal was to reach out to an audience of ordinary fans was by reporting on “what was around [him] at the time…an outer boroughs milieu mostly.” He wanted to provide readers at home with a glimpse into the culture that meant so much to him and to them, and to which he had gained special access. He latched onto the “idea that the reader— all readers— had to be able to get this”; he wanted to bring them along with him as he explored the rock scene.

His first piece, Soundblast ’66, reported on an unremarkable pop concert in the Bronx, as seen from the stands. Goldstein recalls, “I couldn’t get my hands on Stevie Wonder or any of the other people I was watching. I could get my hands on the fans. They were the closest, most tangible part of the experience, and also I felt that I was among them.” His review captured the event from their perspective for a home audience:

The stage was set upon the pitcher’s mound. This initial separation between audience and performer was never breached. Rock ’n’ roll is a big medium, and the stadium’s acoustics—with its automatic echo and feedback—are immensely discothequable. But for groups like the McCoys, it was a hell of a distraction. Fireworks exploded in the grandstand. Fistfights broke out. Autograph hunters roamed wild in the outfield. And a horde of press photographers knelt at the foot of the stage in homage. The sound was lost in the pseudo-event.

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
The concert was anti-climactic, but Goldstein didn’t hype it up. He stuck to his goal of reporting reality. It wasn’t a sensational piece to start his career with, but it was honest. It effectively conveyed the feeling of the scene; plus, as he said, it was what he had access to, and that was what he wanted to portray.

He often devoted as much space to setting the scenes in his articles as he did to the sounds themselves, because he wanted to bring the reader into his experiences as fully as possible. A “Pop Eye” article from 1967 about the English rock band Cream is another representative example of this aspect of Goldstein’s approach:

It's Saturday night at the Village Theatre, New York's sad-eyed answer to the Fillmore-Avalon scene. Under the marquee, Slavs gape and Ratner's rejects mourn the loss of Second Avenue. "Paul Muni used to play here," they mutter in mink-trimmed dismay. "Oh yeah?" answers a rakish redhead, lifting his beads absentely to the skies. "What group was he with?"

The theatre proper is jammed. Aisles abound with woolly wanderers. Everyone jangles, loose and shaggy. It feels like Saturday afternoon at the flicks with 25 cartoons, a Superman short, and three butchered Frankenstein films. Except the Village Theatre is higher, and they don't sell tootsie rolls.

It's going to be a very heavy trip tonight…Backstage, the Cream wait in a barren dressing room with two broken chairs.59

The language he uses is informal, colloquial, and colorful. Although it is occasionally overwrought, it is effective in conveying the feeling of the experience and capturing the spirit of the scene. Sometimes the references he uses are obscured by time and distance, as in the references to Ratner’s (a popular Second Avenue

kosher deli that supplied the food to the Fillmore) or Slavs (referring to the strongly Eastern European population of the neighborhood, and the changing demographics of the area as it became trendy among young Bohemians); but at the time, the in-jokes would have heightened his hipness quotient as well as aiding in his goal of “reflecting what he was seeing.”

The writing is snappy and witty, with jokes and wordplay punctuating his scene-setting. Goldstein’s descriptions are evocative as well as economical, as in the unglamorous depiction of backstage: “the Cream wait in a barren dressing room with two broken chairs.” Overall, what he provided was a rich portrayal of the neighborhood and culture that surrounded him, all while covering rock music.

His facility with descriptions was manifest in not only how he captured what he was seeing around him, but also in what how he conveyed what he was hearing. A 1968 article titled “Notes from Underfoot” contains a good example of the type of expressive language Goldstein used in his music reviews. Writing about English singer Julie Driscoll’s cover of Bob Dylan’s song “This Wheel is on Fire,” Goldstein says,

the single is fine, if a little superficial around the harmonic edges—but it’s hard miss with such throbbing, heavy material. The album is another matter. It’s swank and shallow, drenched in organ-syrup like marinated Jimmy Smith. Julie Driscoll’s voice is part Bobbie Gentry, part Aretha Franklin, and very little her own.61


The phrase “drenched in organ-syrup like marinated Jimmy Smith [a jazz musician who played the organ]” is particularly evocative, and combined with adjectives like “swank,” “shallow,” and “superficial,” the record seems insipid and cloying. This, along with the assertion that her voice was “very little her own,” made it clear both what the record sounded like—heavy but vapid—and how little Goldstein thought of it. His description together with his discernment make for an effective review, convincingly arguing that the record was not worth his readers’ time or money in only a few lines.

Similarly, when describing Joni Mitchell, Goldstein engages the reader with colorful language and deft turns of phrase. He wrote,

No to Joni Mitchell! All they say about her is true. She is sensitive, all right. Oh, that tinklebelle voice. How she sparkles fairy dust over essence and existence. Very soulful songs she writes, but very antiseptic too—no? Odor of Bactine over bleeding wounds of life. 62

He captures the airiness of her voice and the ethereal feeling of her music, particularly with the imagery of “sparkling fairy dust,” but quickly cuts it with the sharpness of his “Bactine” reference, invoking a multi-sensory reaction that appealed not only to sound, but sight and smell as well. By using colorful language to bring strong images, memories, and feelings to mind, Goldstein creates an instant connection with his audiences, making it possible for him to guide them effectively as a critic.

62 Ibid.
It was important that his style conveyed the sounds of the music, but also the feelings it elicited, because for him rock and roll was about emotions as much as aesthetics. In a 1968 “Pop Eye” article, Goldstein provided a vivid portrayal of Johnny Cash’s album, “At Folsom Prison”:

Cash’s voice is as thick and gritty as ever, but filled with the kind of emotionalism you seldom find in rock (for all the hue and cry about passionate intensity, white pop singers don’t often let go do they?) His songs are simple and sentimental, his message clear…You can feel the rapport as the audience responds to Cash’s hard-luck ballads, his accounts of futile attempts at escape, and his inevitable equation of separation from loved ones with death. The feeling of hopelessness—even amid the cheers and whistles—is overwhelming. You come away drained, as the record fades out to the sound of men booing their warden, and a guard’s gently but deadly warning, “Easy now.” Talk about magical mystery tours.  

Much of what he describes are highly personal responses, about feeling Cash’s passion and intensity. Writing that the “feeling of hopelessness…is overwhelming,” Goldstein captures not only Cash’s feeling of desolation, but his own deeply emotional response to the music. By writing “you can feel the rapport” and “you come away feeling drained,” he invited his readers to put themselves in his place and feel what he felt as he listened to the record.

All of this was about accessibility; by connecting with his audience he could facilitate their connection with the music. To this end, another hallmark of his style was his heavy emphasis on lyrics. This was a time before lyrics were printed on albums, and a time when the lyrical content of rock music was becoming more

important to fans (including Goldstein) than ever. In a 1966 “Pop Eye” article titled, “The Sound of J.D. Salinger Clapping,” Goldstein published several lines from a Simon and Garfunkel song called “Dangling Conversation,” and his analysis of it signaled his attitude toward lyrics. He wrote,

Those image-drenched words have never appeared between slim cardboard covers marked with Japanese water colors. They have never dwelt in the refuge of a dust jacket, or in the praise of a window display at Brentanos. The Book of the Month Club hasn't had a finger in the distribution.

"Dangling Conversation" is modern music, teenage music, rock 'n' roll. You won't find it between the Library lions. You can't hear it at the 92nd Street Y. And even though they won't be studying verse by Paul Simon in lit this year, chances are he's brought you closer to the feel and texture of modern poetry than anything since the big black-out.

His tone here is defiant, as it often was when he was discussing elements of the music he felt defensive about. Lyrics did not take the recognizable form of traditional poetry, but that did not mean that it was not poetry. His effort here, as often was the case in his work, is complex in terms of its approach to cultural hierarchy. It is a mixture of appeals to cultural norms and surly defiance of those norms.

First, the lyrics Goldstein chose to feature more closely resemble traditional poetic form than many rock lyrics did. By choosing Simon and Garfunkel to make his point rather than someone like Bob Dylan—whose lyrics featured less conventional rhyme and meter—Goldstein does not require the skeptical reader to make as much of a leap when making the mental connection between rock lyrics and poetry. While he chose a relatively unchallenging example to make his point,
probably to appeal to a broad audience, he simultaneously tried to distance rock
lyrics from mainstream culture as much as possible.

The derisive references to Brentano’s (a popular New York City bookstore
chain), the Book of the Month Club (an enduring symbol of middlebrow culture),
and the New York Public Library lions (symbolic of traditional cultural institutions)
show that although he wants to convince his readers that the lyrics are poetry, he
does not want them to associate them with staid middlebrow culture. He is not
claiming it’s as good as mainstream poetry, he’s saying it is better. His message
was: this is not your parents’ stodgy poetry; it is vital, modern, and on the cutting
edge. The combination of appeals to the accepted cultural standards alongside a
rejection of those standards is typical of Goldstein’s approach.

In 1968, he published a book called The Poetry of Rock, which he describes
as “a cultural middle finger going to the intellectual community saying, ‘This is
poetry.’” He reflected many years later, “Well, it is poetry. There is a blues poetics.
But, just reprinting the lyrics with little annotations is not such a great intellectual
exercise.”64 Though Goldstein now minimizes the endeavor, it was an important
moment in the move toward a more respectful approach to the rock lyric. In 2010’s
“The Poetry of Rock: Song Lyrics Are Not Poems but the Words Still Matter;
Another Look at Richard Goldstein's Collection of Rock Lyrics,” Pete Astor writes,
“A difference in engagement with lyrics was signaled by Goldstein’s collection; it

64 Goldstein, interview.
was the beginning of a time when the rock and pop fan could situate their tastes alongside more ‘high’ cultural values.”

Though Goldstein’s view of cultural hierarchy was more complicated than simply trying to place rock alongside “high” art, his message that rock lyrics were valuable art connected with many readers. The book has even become something of a cult favorite over the years that it’s been out of print; its lyrical content is combined with psychedelic imagery in a way that is both beautiful and evocative of the spirit of the time.

From his extensive descriptions, his focus on the scene around him, his personal and subjective approach, and his inclusion and championing of lyrical content, Goldstein was drawing his readers into his world. By unpacking the youth culture, he tried to help his young readers (and, just as often, himself) make sense of what was going on around them. Outsiders—older people, squares, dilettantes, or just the curious—could read about his world, too, but his Pop Eye column was primarily directed at his own generation. By “writing about what was around [him] at the time” in the New Journalism style, Goldstein created a rapport with a group that was used to being denigrated or ignored by the national media and cultural

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66 Ibid.
It was important to him for kids to have an outlet for their interests, as he had had the *Voice* when he was growing up, and he provided it.

In his career as a rock critic, Goldstein challenged representations of his generation. He was careful to show the importance of the fans to rock culture and reflect earnestly on the role the music played in their lives. He spoke directly to them without either condescending or coming across as a fawning fanzine writer. He wrote in language that was unabashedly of his generation, and at the same time he spoke of cultural theory and politics in a deliberately intellectual way. Goldstein conveyed his experiences in a style that invited readers to put themselves in his place, and spoke to them in a way that was intended to foster dialogue and discourse among the community of rock fans.

Although his youth was a potential liability among older audiences, his age was an essential part of what differentiated Goldstein’s approach from his colleagues. It was his ticket straight to the hearts of his readers as well as being a commonality with his subjects. When describing his imagined audience, he explains,

> The ideology of the time was that all members of this generation were brothers who called themselves ‘kids,’ sometimes with a ‘z,’ and we would call each other ‘the kids’- as in ‘The Kids Are Alright’... So, wherever I went, I felt in touch with [other young people]. The music and the culture around it really tied people together.\(^\text{68}\)

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67 Goldstein, interview.

68 Goldstein, interview.
According to Paul Friedlander in *Rock and Roll: A Social History*, Goldstein was tapping into a common feeling that began in the 1950s:

> In an era of the organization man, when dutiful parents strove to belong and conform, rock music became a catalyst for teens to form their own group identity - a comradeship of those who felt good about, and identified with, the music. Many youth of the fifties viewed rock and roll as an expression of both rebellion against and a growing uneasiness with the perceived rigidity and banality of an era dominated by conservative Republican politics and Mitch Miller musicality."\(^\text{69}\)

This shift meant that it benefitted Goldstein to make a total break from traditional criticism and critics, whereas other generations of critics might have sought to fit in with or be accepted by them.

In an era of generational identity politics, demonstrating one’s difference from the older generation was an important signal that one was of the new sensibility. This was important for both cultural and social reasons. Simon Frith explains, “Music can stand for, symbolize, and offer the immediate experience of collective identity….\(^\text{70}\) Self-identifying as a member of an out-group, which is how those participating in the youth revolt thought of themselves, meant being part of another in-group. Frith goes on to say,

> The pleasure that pop music produces is a pleasure of identification—with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it. And it is important to note that the production of identity is also a production of non-identity—it is a process of inclusion and exclusion.\(^\text{71}\)

\(^\text{69}\) Friedlander, 27.


\(^\text{71}\) Ibid, 38.
For Goldstein, this process was oriented mostly around age, more so than race, income, or regionalism.

He engaged in the ongoing discourse about generational politics, bringing in cultural theory to explain how the generation gap related to perceptions of rock and roll. In an article discussing Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Goldstein used McLuhan’s theories to explain the difficulty older generations had in understanding and appreciating rock music, and thus to challenge their view that it was a valueless form. As a pioneering figure in the study of electronic media, McLuhan posited the idea that new media are always, necessarily, approached in terms of the old media. He illustrates this idea through the metaphor of the “horseless carriage,” or the tendency to explain the unknown in terms of the known. McLuhan recognized that younger generations who come of age with new technologies and mediums understand them naturally in their own terms, never having had to assimilate them into a known world.

For Goldstein, McLuhan’s conception of the generation gap was crucial to understanding the disdain and perplexion of adult authorities toward rock and roll, attitudes that had relegated the form to the trash heap of musical culture. Goldstein, extending McLuhan’s arguments, posited that adults hated rock because they didn't understand it, and they didn’t understand it because they couldn’t. While new mediums like rock music were changing the way young people thought of the world around them, they had to be translated to older people who could never understand what it is like to have grown up with the form.
“[T]he 1960s pop critics,” according to Stanley Aronowitz, “influenced by McLuhan, refused a technophobia that was ineluctably linked to a parallel aversion to mass culture.” As Goldstein explains to his readers, “McLuhan tells us that ‘every home has a Berlin Wall’ between its youthful and adult occupants.” He goes on,

[Adults declare] that rock ‘n’ roll cannot possibly be artistic because it is self-limiting in form, because it is not musically complex, because it had traditionally been commercial and therefore anti-artistic. When we mention that rock ‘n’ roll is musical television, that it is the language of the streets and increasingly of the campus, that it comes closest to being a universal means of communication, we are met with impatient snickering from those who inhabit the other side of the wall.

Rock’s value, along with its message, was lost on adults, leading them to deride the music as degraded; any attempts to convince them otherwise fell on deaf ears unattuned to the language of the youth culture.

To Goldstein, this was “the most disturbing thing” about Understanding Media, “

that those who attempt to impose standards upon the ‘cool’ electronic media based on their aesthetic experiences with the printed word are cultural illiterates. They are as far from understanding radio, television, cinema, or mixed-media discotheques as non-literate cultures are from comprehending the scope of literature.

72 Aronowitz, 170.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
Using McLuhan’s idea that full assimilation of the new media by older generations was impossible, Goldstein’s youth once again seems a clear advantage to his cultural work.

Goldstein undermines objections to the notion that rock 'n' roll is artistic by denying that the adult authorities making them are qualified to evaluate the form. Nor could they be taught to value the music as youths did automatically: “Pop aestheticism has found its maximum support among the young intellectuals because its emergence as a meaningful experience can best be appreciated by those who have been nursed on the 24-inch flickering box.”

76 Converting his review of McLuhan’s book into a sort of mission statement, Goldstein concludes, “The question now is how to deal with pop…How do we evaluate our responses to the electronic waves racing through our living room? How do we tell what is noise and what is good, even artistic, rock 'n' roll? ...Rock 'n' roll needs a critic.”

77 Goldstein challenges the cultural status quo and presents himself as an alternative. Using the first person to establish a connection between him and his audience, Goldstein identifies traditional adult authorities as “they,” while “we are met” with their “snickering.”

78 This was a rejection of the prevailing cultural view that mass produced art was a form of degraded culture, one that Goldstein (and McLuhan) associated with age. Again,
Goldstein’s youth is no barrier to his journalistic success as he banks on it for cache with his audience.

Goldstein’s adversarial stance toward authority and the status quo meant that media criticism became a prominent theme of his articles. As his contact with the music industry increased, so did his concerns about the media’s transparency as well as their complicity in manipulating fans. Though nominally about a press conference for the Yardbirds, Goldstein’s October 1966 article “Giraffe Hunters” is about the rock machine, and the other reporters and industry insiders that helped to run it. In an interview conducted for this dissertation, Goldstein identified “Giraffe Hunters” as a key text documenting the internal and external conflicts engulfing him as his reputation began to grow. Goldstein had capitalized on his difference from other journalists from his earliest days at the Voice, but this stance would become harder to maintain as he ascended the ranks of pop culture’s elite, and this internal struggle came through in his media criticism.

He described his colleagues as “what's-your-favorite-color types.” They were gossiping, parroting sycophants, who seemed to be in cahoots with the record companies, press agents, and the musicians. For Goldstein, whose focus was reaching out to and representing the fans, this was unacceptable. He complained about them openly in his article, saying, “This week’s reality is a…dismal affair. It stares brazenly at you over coffee and danish when the conversation turns to

79 Goldstein, interview.
squinting whispers over the affair between an editor and an up ‘n’ coming guitarist slated for a major piece that week.” He recalls being preoccupied with them, saying, “I would’ve noticed [the] clash of journalists. And also the industry, which I had no idea about until I started writing about it. This voracious, engulfing, appropriating, deracinating industry that was trying to seize onto this new thing.”

His disdain for the music business is clear in “Giraffe Hunters,” as is his rising bitterness about the media’s role in it:

In the real world, little red dots tell you which records to watch. In the real world, the crooner of candy cane ballads is sleeping with his manservant. In the real world, Dick Clark smiles a sour-cream grin over a pack of bad-breath mints while the Action Kids turn cartwheels over a song about racial discontent masquerading as cha-cha. The radio station that won’t play music which advocates taking “toxins” distributes a record magazine with a “psychedelic special.” Very real.

Reality in pop music is always lying around willing to be written up. But this passivity is deceptive, because the real world of teen culture is so heavily soaked in greasepaint that it slips and slide through your fingers, always visible as a disguise but never solid enough to grip and dissect.

His descriptions of the industry read as much as an existential crisis as criticism. Goldstein worked to separate himself from the other members of his industry; however, ultimately he was a part of the same machine that they were. He tried to reckon with the complicated relationship between the music media and the music industry while taking the position of a removed observer. He tried to distinguish

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81 Goldstein, interview.

82 Goldstein, “Giraffe Hunters.”
himself by highlighting his colleague’s aggressive and clumsy approaches, but ultimately he fails to interrogate his own complicity in the industry. His articles helped determine the course of those “little red dots” as much as anyone, “dots” that translated into very real money.

On the other hand, his criticisms of the other reporters were based largely around their outsider relationship to pop music, not the endeavor of music reporting itself. As his career progressed, he would come to understand more and more that his role as a mediator between the industry and fans was morally complicated. But at this point in 1966, he was still thinking of his work as somehow purer than that of other reporters. This belief was based on his self-conception as a fan, coming at the music from inside rather than outside the rock culture.

His disdain of mainstream press circuits was in line with his politics—particularly the New Journalism’s challenges to a consensus press and the counterculture’s anti-establishment attitude. Part of the New Journalism’s goal in championing an alternative approach was to contrast with these types of writers and provide an alternative to them. They wanted to show that the truth wasn’t the sole province of “objective” reporters, and that objectivity was an impossible ideal anyway. Goldstein wanted to expose other reporters’ motives and hold them accountable for them. Money, egos, sex, and power distorted everything in the pop industry (even his own perspective), and Goldstein’s goal was to make these factors visible to his readers.
Of course, Goldstein too had personal relationships with his subjects and music industry insiders, and these entanglements became increasingly complicated over time. This discomfort would turn to distress as his fame rose and he became powerful in his own right. He continued to write media criticism, but his own role in it became harder for him to reconcile with his ideals, ultimately leading to his retirement from the field.

His push for transparency in his media criticism extended beyond revealing the mechanisms working behind scenes of the music press. He also felt that it was important to expose other paternalistic interference that occurred in the pop music industry. Because rock music and democratic ideals were so tied up for him, any abrogation of the “popular” aspect of popular music was objectionable on a political level.

His first campaign to mobilize his audience centered on New York City’s trendiest pop music station, WMCA, which censored songs they deemed inappropriate for airplay due to drug or sexual references. Although the song whose ban prompted Goldstein’s first position piece on the issue in 1966, “They’re Coming to Take Me Away Ha-Haaa”, was not, by his own admission, a particularly good one, Goldstein nevertheless “questioned the right of such censorship without regard to the consumer's response.”

them “undisputed” power over the record market, and so their interference in content made it possible that artists would begin to limit the free expression of lyricists.\textsuperscript{84}

Goldstein worried that this might prompt pop artists to cater to commercial standards rather than audiences’ interests. Whereas champions of other, accepted art forms like poetry would reel at such blatantly moralistic paternalism, Goldstein argued, rock’s artists were being left to the wolves because the genre was not respected.

It was important for Goldstein to express to his audience that the commercial nature of rock music did not negate its value as art. He was suspicious of the commercial side of the industry, but in spite of the constant machinations of vested interests in musical production, it was nonetheless an important and valid art form. It may have been “musical television,” but that didn’t stop it from being meaningful, beautiful, or culturally important. Because it was art, he believed that it deserved protection. He wrote,

Rock ‘n’ roll is the medium in which some of our best young poets have chosen to express themselves. They are victimized today by as vicious and encompassing a system of censorship as ever hindered the publication of a novel or the screening of a film. It is fashionable enough to protest censorship in printed literature, theater, or even film. But Radio DJs often act as a legion of decency, and they do so without any objection from their audience.”\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
Goldstein wanted customary freedoms of artistic expression to apply rock; it was an appeal with the central tenet was that rock and roll was, in fact, a musical art.

Goldstein argued that a new paradigm of musical consideration was necessary to suit a new mass consumer age, as well as the generation of artists and fans that had grown up alongside it. Cultural hierarchy—the way in which society organizes its cultural products—needed shaking up and reforming, just like the other institutions under assault by Sixties radicals.

Goldstein believed that the greatest poets and artists of his generation were going unheralded because cultural institutions were unwilling to look outside of traditional art forms. For Goldstein, this was unacceptable, a disservice to the artists and art itself. Believing that “a blues song is as complicated as a piece by Bach,” Goldstein felt compelled to “burst…hierarchies of culture” and replace them with more responsive ways of assessing music, suited to the rapidly shifting realities of American mass media.86

Calling lyricists “our best young poets,” Goldstein argued that censorship would either stifle their artistry or prevent their work from reaching its intended audience. He quoted one musician who claimed, "DJs are 'standing square in the way of anything new or challenging in pop music.'"87 He believed that rock was a political vehicle, “a sure way to reach the masses with… ‘radical philosophical ideas.’”88

86 Goldstein, interview.

87 Goldstein, “The Good-Guy Censors.”

88 Ibid.
this regard, “good guy censors” appeared less like affable guardians and more like agents of adult repression.

Another effect of radio censorship that concerned Goldstein was the distortion of the pop charts. He believed that the results of Billboard’s tabulations were misleading because they used a metric that placed undue emphasis on airplay. He argued that to correct their inaccuracies, chart-makers should put greater emphasis on record purchases than airplay. Why was Goldstein so preoccupied with the issue of the charting formulae? He believed that the “popular” aspect of pop music was what had generated such a worthy new form, one that spoke to a generation. When the older set sought to control its content, they were trying to neutralize its revolutionary messages. Authentic expression would be adulterated if artists were forced to kowtow to paternalistic industry standards for their music to be heard. Commercial interference would stifle rock’s rebellious, challenging, and empowering content.

Urging action in the form of a letter-writing campaign, Goldstein closed, “What the good guys are saying to you dear audience is there are words, expressions, and subjects which you should not be exposed to. And you, beloved listeners, should have something to say about that.”89 He was speaking directly to the community of his readers, and urging them to take action together.

89 Ibid.
Once again, Goldstein positions himself as being more on the consumer side of the music than the business end. Because he considered himself part of the authentic community pop emerged from, he believed that his own influence wasn’t an adulterant to authenticity. Simon Frith writes about this phenomenon in *Popular Music and Identity*.

The suggestion is that pop music becomes more valuable the more independent it is of the social forces that organize the pop process in the first place: pop value is dependent on something outside pop, is rooted in the person, the auteur, community or the subculture that lies behind it. If good music is authentic music, then critical judgment means measuring the performers’ ‘truth’ to the experiences or feelings they are describing. Rock criticism depends on myth—the myth of the youth community, the myth of the creative artist. The reality is that rock, like all twentieth century pop musics, is a commercial form, music produced as a commodity, for a profit, distributed through mass media as mass culture…The myth of authenticity is, indeed, one of rock’s own ideological effects, an aspect of its sales process…Rock criticism is a means of legitimating tastes, justifying value judgments, but it doesn’t not really explain how those judgments came to be made in the first place.”

Though Goldstein would later grapple with questions of his own place in this process, at this early stage of his career he was still thinking of himself as more of a fan than a reporter. He says that his approach was that of a fan, “a [music] lover, an *amateur* in the literal sense—in the French sense.” Though the reality was that he was very much a part of the culture industry, he tried to mediate the influence of those in the culture industry who weren’t themselves rock fans. This protectiveness,

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91 Goldstein, interview.
though somewhat naïve, was aimed at making sure control of the music’s direction stayed in the hands of its young appreciators rather than paternalistic DJs.

Goldstein’s anti-censorship campaign got a major supporter, Allen Ginsberg, but Ginsberg’s participation reinforced some of the traditional conceptions of cultural hierarchy that Goldstein wanted to challenge. The poet wrote a lengthy letter to the station in protest of their practices, which Goldstein published in its entirety in “Pop Eye.” Ginsberg wrote,

I am firmly convinced that they [rock lyricists] are among the most accomplished of high artistic/classic poets of the generation succeeding my own. For that reason, I beg they be protected from the contumely and censorship of persons who are not qualified to judge their spiritual and social value, and their contributions to American language. And I offer my own credentials as Poet and Guggenheim Fellow in Poetry to affirm their accomplishments.92

Ginsberg’s letter harkened to a conventional, hierarchical, and elitist conception of art, comparing rock lyricists to “high artistic/classic poets” and invoking his credentials as an officially recognized, capital-P “Poet.” Ginsberg unintentionally reinforced the hierarchy by arguing from within its framework. His language was loaded with conventional values, as when he wrote, “Miraculously, intentions and lyrics of popular music have evolved to include true Poetics.”93 That it should require a “miracle” for popular music to become poetic shows that, like many other cultural

92 Goldstein, “The Good-Guy Censors.”
93 Ibid.
authorities, Ginsberg envisions popular music as inherently inferior as a matter of form. This was in direct conflict with Goldstein’s beliefs about cultural hierarchy.

Although the formulation of Ginsberg’s argument was more conservative and his perspective differed substantially from Goldstein’s, they shared the desire to champion artistic freedom. They agreed that censorship was a threat to revolutionary power of rock. Ginsberg wrote, “At such a stage, businesses—as usual, huckstering…against so-called ‘controversial’ works of Poetry are not neutral acts; they are aggressive and vile attacks on human liberty and beauty.” Though, like Goldstein, he viewed the fight against pop censorship as a political imperative, his approach indicates that his conception of the nature of popular art and artistic value remained essentially undisturbed. He sought to shelter rock within the traditional protections of expression afforded to high poetry by asserting that it qualified as such.

Though well-intended, Ginsberg’s approach to the situation differed from Goldstein’s, whose arguments against censorship rested on championing popular music in its own regard rather than simply seeking highbrow credentials for it. In an interview conducted for this dissertation, Goldstein explained that he believed that “saying that low culture is superior to ‘elitist’ high culture [takes] a position which accepts the modernist distinction between high and low and merely inverts the value

94 Ibid.
judgment.” Nevertheless, although he disagreed with much of the theory behind it, Goldstein accepted Ginsberg’s endorsement of his protest and was grateful for his support.

This campaign was the beginning of a friendship between Goldstein and Ginsberg that inspired Goldstein to explore of the political meanings and functions of popular music in other cultures. Ginsberg had recently returned from an expedition to Eastern Europe, publishing a book of letters he wrote during his time there. Ginsberg spent much of 1964-1965 lobbying to Eastern European radicals, artists, and dissidents “in favor of psychedelic drugs, sexual freedom, and liberty from oppressive police bureaucracy.” He wrote that he witnessed a “cultural battle between youths’ rock and roll and the totalitarian bureaucracy,” explaining that “Marxists felt that rock-n-roll gave the youth culture a voice of its own and they’d become too loose and independent for mind control.” Such descriptions piqued Richard Goldstein’s interest, obsessed as he was by the intersection between youth culture and radical politics. He was eager “to meet these young musicians” and


97 Ibid, 441.

98 Ibid.
appraise rock’s meaning in foreign contexts.\textsuperscript{99} Ginsberg provided Goldstein with his address book full of contacts he had made there, Goldstein’s brand new literary agent gave him $750, and off he went to report on the global political influence of rock and roll music.

This was the first of many articles in which he would travel around the country and around the world, reporting back on how rock and roll was moving in the lives of its fans. When he started, he wrote about “what was around [him] at the time…an outer boroughs milieu mostly,”\textsuperscript{100} but as his opportunities expanded, so did the scope of his stories. He acted as a tour guide to his readers, exposing them to rock communities around the world. His facility with descriptions and the tools of the New Journalism helped him to relate what he was seeing and experiencing, enabling readers to imagine that they were a part of a wider community of likeminded young people that spanned the world. His dispatches from rock’s outposts expanded conceptions of the extent and continuity of the global rock community and fostered a sense of camaraderie among its members everywhere. His rock expeditions also affirmed to his readers that rock and roll was an important and powerful cultural force internationally.

In late August of 1966, he wrote about rock and roll from London, East Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, and Paris. Goldstein saw firsthand that in Eastern Europe,
“Pop music is much more than a pastime. It is something one searches for, like cigarettes or chocolate or freedom.”101 His experiences on his trip would affirm his beliefs in the political importance and transformative power of rock. In America, rock provided an outlet for youths’ defiant feelings and ideas. In the Soviet bloc, Western rock was illegal, so listening constituted more than a symbolic rejection of authority. Goldstein observed, “Here, no teenager has to burn his draft card or smoke marijuana to rebel against the system. All he has to do is tune into the radio.”102 Listening to rock was a politicized act in the Eastern bloc because, as Goldstein said, “rock and roll means the West.”103


102 Ibid. Western culture was considered an ideological weapon; Communists believed that the artist was “the engineer of the human soul.” If socialist art could transform the socialist’s heart, then rock and roll could do the same. “Unsettled by the explosive popularity of this Western ‘ape culture,’ the Soviets mirrored their Western counterparts by ‘blaming rock and roll for a myriad of social ills: juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, vandalism and sexual assaults’” Restrictions and official rhetoric failed to quash pop’s feverish youth appeal. (Timothy W. Ryback, Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 4.)

103 The Soviets opposed rock and roll as a matter of course from its earliest days—it was a Western capitalist product and thus inimical to Socialism. When rock emerged in the mid-1950s it was banned in the GDR because of its American origin: it was the era of the ‘cold war’ and East German politicians were in search of a socialist national culture, one which could articulate an antifaschistische-demokratische Erneuerung (anti-Fascist-democratic renewal). In this climate, Western influences had to be rejected and rock ‘n’ roll was seen as a symbol of capitalist decadence another example of the ‘cultural barbarism of American imperialism’. (Georg Maas and Hartmut Reszel, “Whatever Happened to...: The Decline and Renaissance of Rock in the Former GDR,” Popular Music, Vol. 17, No. 3, October, 1998, 267.)
The Soviets tried to undermine Western rock’s appeal by broadcasting their own ideologically-friendly rock. However, this ersatz pop was no substitute for the real thing, prompting NATO to begin transmitting rock music into the East as a propaganda tool in 1958. “Young people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union exalted amidst the musical fallout from this stratospheric confrontation,” writes Rock Around the Bloc author Timothy Ryback. Goldstein visited the divided city of Berlin amidst this battle for the airwaves and the ears of the youth, and his reports explained rock’s important role in the Cold War cultural conflict. Only a few blocks from Checkpoint Charlie, Goldstein met up with two East Germans. Manfred was an “accomplished cultural saboteur” at seventeen and he and his friend Rolf convened on the spot every night at 7:45 with their transistor radios to tune in for the “pop music blitzkrieg.” Goldstein reported, “It is not difficult to hear American radio on the streets. That is because at 8 p. m. Armed Forces Radio begins to broadcast rock and roll.”

A self-admitted “adrenaline junky,” Goldstein then courted danger, risking arrest by accompanying the two German teens on a quest to find an illegal rock and roll club. This was the face of rock he wanted to see, the local corollary to what he saw as an international youth rebellion. Goldstein was nervous, but he agreed to accompany the boys on their illicit trek to a secret club for “Die Kids.” The offer

104 Ryback, 86-87.
105 Ryback, 86-87.
106 Goldstein, “Bell Bottom Blue Jeans.”
echoed Goldstein’s own identification with “the kidz.” After an arduous trek across the entire city (with Goldstein in a constant state of paranoia), the trio finally trudged “down a long, unlit dirt road, skirting mud puddles and wet grass, detouring through a field” to the underground rock club. It was closed. “But—okay, it’s a story anyway,” wrote Goldstein. The music itself wasn’t the point of his story as much as the effect the music had on its fans, and how it linked young people together across the world. Creating a sense of camaraderie and global connectedness was part of Goldstein’s goal of bringing together an imagined community of young rock fans. He also shored up his argument that rock and roll was important politically, socially, and culturally by showing its power around the world.

Some countries Goldstein visited had slightly laxer laws about Western pop, which gave him the opportunity to show that while the role of rock in the Eastern bloc was not monolithic, its appeal was. As officials in East Germany were struggling to suppress rock, a pop concert given by Paul Anka in Prague was treated almost like a state function. Goldstein was worlds away from his experience tramping through East Berlin fields with teenaged rebels as he watched the crème of the Czech bureaucracy publicly fete the fading Canadian teen idol. Limited supply and intense demand made pop a hot commodity even among Czech elites. Goldstein

107 Goldstein, interview.

108 Goldstein, “Bell Bottom Blue Jeans.”

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.
writes, “for most people in Prague… [Anka’s visit] might as well have been Palm Sunday.”\textsuperscript{111} The concert was held a venue that was out of the price range of most teens, who gathered in “envious crowds” outside the lobby in their blue jeans and “offered their kingdom for a ticket stub. If the customary line about Western ‘revisionist’ entertainment still holds here,” Goldstein reported, “it was not visible in the beaming faces of bureaucrats, their wives, and their neatly scrubbed children.”\textsuperscript{112} Inside, there was “not a bluejean was in sight,” writes Goldstein. “The sparkle of real jewelry and the tinkle of manicured voices filled the air.”\textsuperscript{113}

Pop culture was long held in high esteem by people from all levels of society in Prague. Before World War Two, the city had a bustling jazz scene. After Czechoslovakia became communist, they resisted the Soviets’ limitations on cultural imports more strongly than other Eastern Bloc states. So starved were the citizens of

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. Vaclav Havel captured the importance of pop in Czech culture: “Unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed, to sing songs that were relevant to their lives, and to live freely in dignity and partnership … Everyone understood that an attack on the Czech musical underground was an attack on an elementary and important thing, something that in fact bound everyone together: it was an attack on the very notion of ‘living within the truth’, on the real aims of life. The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same as the freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend the various social and political interests of society. . . . Who could have foreseen that the prosecution of one or two obscure rock groups would have such far-reaching consequences?” (Vaclav Havel and Jan Vladislav, \textit{Václav Havel: Living in Truth: Twenty-Two Essays Published on The Occasion of The Award of The Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel}, London: Faber and Faber, 1989, 63.)

\textsuperscript{113} Goldstein, “Paul Anka in Prague.”
“the cultural capital of Eastern Europe,” that they feted a “tinfoil Paul Anka” in a show that “was all adulation and orchestration.” Anka was already passé to Goldstein’s edgy readership, but “that point was lost on this audience, because they wanted what America has to offer in abundance—slick.” Preened for stardom since he was a teenager, Anka oozed slick, like a younger Dean Martin. This was pop for grown-ups. As Anka “crooned into the microphone” before his high-end audience, he said, “I think you like rock 'n' roll. It’s very loud—good for the blood.” The sounds of “Catskill mountain cackling filled the hall.” The Catskill mountain reference (a popular vacation spot for older, upper-middle class New Yorkers, known for its corny performers) combines with Goldstein’s description of the young people unable to afford tickets amassed outside the venue to show that assumptions about pop’s generational appeal were upended in Czechoslovakia.

The cultural context of the show made it impossible for Goldstein to maintain his typical disdainful attitude toward glossy music. This may not have been Goldstein’s ideal rock star, but here in Prague, he saw that even schlocky pop was something worth celebrating. After the concert, “the audience filed into the dingy streets. Every once in a while, in Prague, the lid opens a little, and when it closes

114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
again, it is just that much harder to take.” That fact that even Paul Anka’s schmaltz fomented unrest affirmed that access to pop music meant freedom to many people, or at least that the absence of it reminded them of their lack of freedom. Seeing this cemented his belief in rock as a political force and his determination to use rock criticism to facilitate that connection. What could have been a simple concert review instead explored the role of music around the world while conveying to his readers that the music that was important to them was important to the whole world.

He wrote about the common links between rock fans first locally with his “outer boroughs” approach, then globally with his European trip, and then nationally, as he began to travel around the United States, reporting on local rock scenes. In February of 1967, he made his first visit to California, where he explored the countercultural undergrounds in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Rather than simply recounting his experiences, Goldstein took the trip as an opportunity to analyze the phenomenon of an “underground” for his widening audience, serving again as a guide to a rock subculture. Richard Goldstein opened his report from what was once the West Coast’s hippest rock scene with the dateline: “LOS ANGELES--Sunset Strip is dead.” He explained that when the L.A.P.D. cracked down on the underground using a divide-and-conquer approach, the fractured scene “folded into

118 Ibid.

itself like a fan.”\textsuperscript{120} Goldstein eulogized, “You can smell the carrion in the ruins of Pandora’s Box…The Trip, where Donovan skipped merrily and Bob Dylan met the Byrds, now stands stripped and peeling as only neglected California stucco can.”\textsuperscript{121} Hip L.A. was like a ghost town, abandoned by the crowds who once filled its venues. These descriptions were evocative, capturing the dilapidation of the famous location, and using the disrepair to symbolize the dissolution of the once lively L.A. rock scene.

Goldstein writes about the Fifth Estate Coffee House, standing as “a lonely sentry, displaying its sign at the few passing tourists who care to glance: ‘Welcome to Los Angeles, City of Blue Fascism.’”\textsuperscript{122} Surrounding it was a neighborhood that had lost its edgy, vibrant character in the face of police pressure and commercialism. Only “[d]iehards still gather in and around” the area, Goldstein wrote, including a group called the Provos whose “stated goal is the harassment of an alien adult establishment.”\textsuperscript{123} Though they “threaten civil disobedience,” he wrote, theirs was a “Katzenjammer rebellion.” They spent most of their time tagging walls and smoking pot rather than fighting back against the “common enemy they call the heat.”\textsuperscript{124} They

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid

\textsuperscript{122} The Fifth Estate housed the Los Angeles Free Press, a prominent underground periodical modeled after the Village Voice.

\textsuperscript{123} Goldstein, “The Vanishing Underground.”

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
appeared to him to be “a lost cause” due to their prioritization of fashionability over a coherent philosophy or strategy. For a politically-driven revolutionary like Goldstein, the remains of LA’s hip society was depressingly superficial. His disappointment was palpable as he mourned the scene’s passing.

Up the Pacific Coast Highway in San Francisco, he found a counterculture that was the better-developed successor to the Los Angeles scene. He wrote of the continuity of the two cities’ underground scenes, emphasizing that there was a durability to the underground that made it less ephemeral than many assumed. Though one scene had folded, it resurrected itself in a different form just down the road. Goldstein reinforced this connection between the diminished Los Angeles scene and the new San Francisco scene by writing contrasting articles about each as companion pieces, even titling them similarly: “The Vanishing Underground” and “The Flourishing Underground.” The comparison also allowed Goldstein to explain what he thought were positive, worthy features of a counterculture and what he believed to be bad for them.

Whereas the Los Angeles underground was a shadow of its former self, in San Francisco, Goldstein found “the new pop acropolis.” Newsweek, Crawdaddy, and Ramparts had all said so, he reported, prompting thousands of “scenieboppers” to descend on the city. The city’s music was “the most vital in the world,” but the

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.
culture was still endangered in his view. “The most fragile thing to maintain in our culture,” Goldstein wrote, “is an underground. No sooner does a new tribe of rebels skip out, flip out, trip out, and take its stand, than the photographers from *Life* magazine are on the scene doing a cover layout.” Although Goldstein had written and would continue to write for such “breakfast table” publications, he distanced himself from them before his *Village Voice* audience. These were the type of writers who “sometimes treated hippies as comic relief,” according to media critic Alice Echols.

Goldstein was marking a distinction between mass culture and the counterculture, placing himself, his audience, and his subjects in the latter category. He warned that co-optation by the mainstream was the real threat to the underground, just as it had been in Los Angeles. He wrote, “The New Bohemians needn’t worry about opposition these days, just exploitation.” That he may have numbered amongst those exploiting the scene does appear in Goldstein’s report.

The defining factor that separated Goldstein from the other writers who were exploiting the scene, in his view, was that he came from within the culture rather than from without. Therefore, in his perception, he was an ambassador rather than an

127 Ibid.
130 Goldstein, “The Flourishing Underground.”
exploiter. He was indigenous to the rock culture, so he wrote as a native rather than a colonizer. Positioning himself as a representative of rock fans, he quickly became the first choice of mainstream publications looking to cover the youth culture and court them as readers. In 1967, *The Los Angeles Times* referred to Goldstein as “the Secretary-General of the Pop Culture.” 131 In 1969, by which time there were hundreds of rock critics in America, a *Washington Post* literary critic acknowledged, “Richard Goldstein may be the high priest of pop criticism simply because he was the first to act on the idea that the new rock required a closer look than *Hit Parader* was equipped to give it.” 132

As his fame and authority grew, so did his internal conflicts over the cultural role he was playing. For someone who was so preoccupied with questions of class and authenticity, whose fundamental ideological orientation was oppositional and antiestablishment, becoming part of the cultural elite triggered a very personal psychological and ethical crisis for Goldstein. This came through in his work; his subjective approach meant that this inner turmoil often became part of his stories. In experiencing such angst, he was again in step with many of his generation, who began question their own roles as their counterculture entered the mainstream. His work mirrored the broader decline in the youth’s belief in the revolutionary


possibilities of the Sixties, growing acquiescence to the status quo, and the accompanying feelings of confusion and disillusionment.

His debut on the national stage came when he was hired to write the *New York Times*’ first-ever rock review in June of 1967. The subject was the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, a record that challenged traditional notions of what a musical masterpiece should sound like. It was the first rock record to receive widespread acclaim from classical music critics, but Richard Goldstein panned it. The aftermath was disastrous. Goldstein, wrote his contemporary Robert Christgau in *Esquire*, “gave the album a bad notice and was almost lynched for it.”

When Goldstein was initially hired by the *New York Times*, it was thrilling. Although he displayed an anti-mainstream media attitude in his stories, he was a career journalist. His dueling impulses would be characterized by composer Ned Rorem as a “transparent longing to at once chastise and be embraced by the establishment.” Goldstein recalls, “*The Times*, of course I worshipped. Every journalist worshipped the *Times*.” He knew how meaningful the being hired for this particular task was, too. “Then, the *Times* had never had rock 'n' roll covered. They had Robert Sheldon to write about folk music and occasionally he veered into


135 Goldstein, interview.
folk rock, but they had no rock critic. So, the editor of the Arts and Leisure section called me and said, we’d like you to write for us.” Goldstein accepted.

The newspaper of record had not been immune to Goldstein’s media criticism. In 1966 he wrote of their rock coverage,

Slowly, but suspiciously, and with all the cool it can muster, the New York Times has turned its eight-column head toward the world of pop. The Sunday Magazine occasionally breaks its mold of memorabilia (eight pages of economic reform in outer Mongolia spaced out between the bra ads) with a series of pop profiles. In the section loosely labeled "Entertainment," the Times has given a gray-headed nod to such nowniks as Andy Warhol and Timothy Leary. The quality of reportage has been spotty (the Times usually gets its facts straight but often fails in the greater accuracy of mood and meaning). The paper has yet to make adequate use of its influential folk-turned-rock critic Robert Shelton. In his stead, the scene has been quasi-dissected and semi-ignored. Most notably tasteless was the recent coverage afforded the "psychedelic revolution." The article gave the man-on-the-parkway a condescending glimpse of what's happening without disturbing his Sunday comfort. It made it all seem far away and funny, and it missed entirely the roots, the potential, the reality...

But no one is putting the old gray lady down yet. She may be a little slow on the dance floor but she keeps the fuzz away...

Many of the themes of Goldstein’s approach to cultural writing are present in this passage. The charge that “the Times usually gets its facts straight but often fails in the greater accuracy of mood and meaning,” is a quintessentially New Journalistic criticism of mainstream media.

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136 Ibid.

According to social historian Michael Schudson, “the conflict of generations...was seen in American journalism in the late Sixties—a conflict between the old defending objectivity and the young attacking it... [and] between the institutional responsibilities of powerful newspapers and the individual bravado of young reporters.” David Farber refers to this as “the politics of information,” and Goldstein was very aware of the political and cultural commitments he was making when he chose to pursue a career in the alternative press.

However, he also worked for mainstream publications, bringing his personal style and ideological commitments with him in hope of reaching a larger audience with his message. The way he describes their coverage as giving “the man-on-the-parkway a condescending glimpse of what's happening without disturbing his Sunday comfort” is like his criticism of “breakfast table” magazines. But, just as he wrote for Life magazine when they asked, he would write for the Times. He said that they “missed entirely the roots, the potential, the reality...”, which for him were the most important parts of rock music. Being hired to write for the Times meant he would be able to change what he saw as their shortcomings.

He was a long-time Beatles’ fan and “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” was rumored to be their best work yet, so his assignment was extra plum. However, if the Times expected a straight-forward rave over the record, they did not

get it. Instead, Goldstein delivered a pan whose overall tone was a mixture of disgruntlement and disappointment.

In his article, “We Still Need the Beatles, But…” Goldstein opened by explaining to his readers that the Beatles were “no longer merely superstars,” that they had come a long way since the days of Beatlemania. He explained that they were now “[h]ailed as progenitors of a Pop Avant-garde” and “idolized as the most creative members of their generation.” He was explaining the context of the band to an audience who were presumably unaware of the Beatles’ artistry or the esteem they had from the younger generation. For many, this might be the first legitimately thoughtful and deliberate take on rock-as-art they’d read.

However, Goldstein didn’t do what many others had done and would do, which was to exhort the album it as a great example of rock as art. Instead, he panned it, writing,

The 12 new compositions in the album are as elaborately conceived as the cover. The sound is a pastiche of dissonance and lushness. The mood is mellow, even nostalgic. But, like the cover, the over-all effect is busy, hip and cluttered. Like an over-attended child, “Sergeant Pepper” is spoiled. It reeks of horns and harps, harmonica quartets, assorted animal noises and a 41-piece orchestra.

He disapproved of its saturated studio sound, which he blamed for killing any “honest vision” on the record. Goldstein found it “undistinguished,” despite


140 Ibid.

141 Ibid
admitting to the many innovations it introduced. He even proclaimed, “There is nothing beautiful on ‘Sergeant Pepper.’”

He wrote, “for the first time, the Beatles have given us an album of special effects, dazzling but ultimately fraudulent.” He continued, “for the first time, it is not exploration which we sense but consolidation.” He found the album disappointing and wrote his review accordingly. However, there were several other factors that led him to write such a harsh review.

Recently, Goldstein gave a glimpse into his frame of mind while he was writing the review, revealing two major factors that influenced his attitude in “We Still Need the Beatles, But…” First, Goldstein realized after some time that he had listened to the Sgt. Pepper on faulty audio equipment, effecting the sound of the record as he considered it. Another, more telling factor that hindsight has brought to light is Goldstein’s belief that his approach to Sgt. Pepper was partly informed by a desire “to be provocative.” He tempers this acknowledgment by saying, “I also really felt like I hated the record and loved the Beatles.” Still, he came to recognize that he was reacting negatively to the new attention rock was receiving from major cultural figures because of Sgt. Pepper. He says, “All these intellectuals--Joan Peyser, Richard Poirier--they were all writing about the Beatles now. I think that was

142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Goldstein, interview.
145 Goldstein, “We Still Need the Beatles, But…”
part of it. I thought, ‘What the fuck do they know?’" He had spent much of his career thus far focused on convincing his readers of rock’s artistic credibility, but he bristled when the cultural establishment flocked to the form. He felt a protective sense of ownership over them, as a long-time fan and rock writer. Of his perspective at the time he says, “I thought it was just not rock 'n' roll anymore. It was overly hip. Decorated and not the real thing anymore. And I thought that they were going… I just hated it. I just viscerally hated it.”

After his article ran, he found himself opposed on all sides. Having already pitted himself against the establishment critics throughout his career, Goldstein was now also chided by the fans whom he sought to represent. His public wrangling with his audience and peers was protracted. Though it was a difficult experience for Goldstein, it initiated an intellectual debate over the value of pop music that ultimately enhanced the reputation of the genre. The controversy provided insight into what Goldstein and others valued about music. It elicited a cascade letters to the editor. “My editor called me in afterward, the editor of the Arts and Leisure section, and he said ‘We’ve gotten more letters on your review than if we criticized the bible!’ Boxes of letters! I didn't read any of them,” Goldstein admits.

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Goldstein, interview.
The *New York Times* editors read them. They published a lengthy column of them under the title, “They Battle for their Beatles.” One letter came from Richard Saylor, an Associate Professor of Music at St. Lawrence University. He pointed out contradictions in Goldstein’s piece, charging that Goldstein slanted his review to suit his thesis that the record was not “of a very high caliber.” He wrote,

In ‘Within You and Without You” your reviewer rightly noted that George Harrison ‘achieves a remarkable pop synthesis’ and that the song appears seamless; but then, recalling his purpose, he proceeds to quote, out of context, two lines that lead him to the conclusion—dubious at best—that the song is not profound…This inadequate conclusion is then used as the example that supposedly shows these flaws that are “distressingly typical of the album as a whole.’ (Enigmatically, this song, along with “She’s Leaving Home,” is castigated primarily because he likes two other Beatle tunes more!)

Paul Williams, editor of Crawdaddy, also wrote in, summing up the problem:

“Goldstein’s lack of appreciation for the Beatles ’67 is due to him trying too hard…[H]e stared through a telescope and—curiously—he found things out of proportion.” Williams believed he was pedantically searching for hidden meaning where there was none: “Paul McCartney runs up to R. Goldstein screaming ‘Good morning! Good morning!’ Richard scratches his head carefully and thinks: ‘What did he mean by that?’ He meant ‘Good morning.’” Goldstein certainly took music seriously, but he was now being accused of taking it too seriously.

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150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.
His approach alienated fans who wanted the first big rock review to be a celebration of the form. Rather than acting protectively of the genre before his widened audience, Goldstein remained critical of rock—even more so than usual. Some thought he was too critical, that he should have taken the chance to point out the many positive contributions the record made to the genre. One fan wrote in to the Times, “If their new album is not an entire success, they are to be congratulated for their advanced efforts.”\(^{152}\) Another inquired regarding Goldstein’s accusation that the record lacked originality: “Exactly how many historic events are we entitled to for five dollars?”\(^{155}\)

Goldstein responded to the backlash in a July 20, 1967 Village Voice piece titled “I Blew My Cool through the New York Times.”\(^{154}\) His primary argument was that although Sgt. Pepper was “dazzling because it is the most spectacularly produced record in pop,” it was “fraudulent because, beyond the razzmatazz, the songs just aren’t as good as they were on ‘Revolver’ or ‘Rubber Soul.’”\(^{155}\) This was the main thrust of his defense, that the newest Beatles record relied on the flash of production rather than solid songwriting. He was not comparing them to the rest of rock, he clarified, which he readily admitted was much worse overall than Sgt.

\(^{152}\) Ibid.


\(^{154}\) Ibid

\(^{155}\) Ibid.
Pepper. Rather, he was judging them against their own work, which he admired greatly.

At the root, Goldstein was reluctant to embrace the band’s shift to studio-oriented production. The Beatles’ difficult final American tour prompted them to swear off concerts; this combined with advances in recording technology and innovative producing resulted in an album that, unlike their previous work, could not be translated into a live music experience. However, Goldstein preferred “a much simpler production schema,” believing it resulted in something “more profound because of the tightness and originality of its compositions.” Tapping into his disdain for gloss, he wrote,

‘Sergeant Pepper’ illustrates for me the great danger in obsession with studio effect: abandoning concern with the basics of composition for the surrogate magic of production. In ‘Revolver’ I found a complexity that was staggering in its poignancy, its innovation, and its empathy. I called it a complicated masterpiece. But in ‘Sergeant Pepper’ I sense a new distance, a sarcasm masquerading as hip, a dangerously dominant sense of what is stylish. Much of the radicalism on Sergeant Pepper has appeared elsewhere, in a less sophisticated form.

In years since his *New York Times* piece, many historians and critics have come to a consensus of the album that is slightly more in line with Richard Goldstein’s original review. For example, in *Rock and Roll: A Social History*, Paul Friedlander explains,

The Beatles didn’t unilaterally cause these societal and music-industry changes. However, their massive commercial success, combined with the concurrent explosion in communication and marketing technologies, allowed

156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
them to transmit their musical, lyrical, and cultural messages to more people
than ever before. And, because of the Beatles’ status as cultural deities,
young people listened and, much of the time, believed.159

Goldstein notes that “as time went on…the consensus shifted toward my position
and my consensus went the other way...I got to love the record.”160 At the time
though, the Beatles were “these cultural deities” and Goldstein had challenged
them.161

From the most prominent platform he would ever have, he lost the thread of
his approach, which was authentic reporting on rock and roll. He got caught up in his
feelings about the changing fortunes of rock and challenges to his critical territory
and he allowed his review to be affected. His concern, explicit and implicit, was to
deny that Sgt. Pepper’s was a revolutionary album at all costs. Partly because he
believed this did a disservice to all the rock that had come before—even the Beatles’
own previous albums—but partly as a rebuff to all the writers who were just now
discovering the genre’s importance.

The review had mixed effects on Goldstein’s life and career. It effectively
catapulted him to major star status. He was rehired by the New York Times several
times for major album releases, including another Beatles release in 1968. Many new
opportunities arose for him to talk about rock and roll in the public sphere. Some,


160 Goldstein, interview.

161 Goldstein, interview.
like writing for the *Los Angeles Times* or *Life*, he accepted. Others were less appealing. He was offered a television show co-starring boxer Rocky Graziano “because of the contrasts in types.” He declined. In another instance, he remembers,

> I had a lunch with Otto Preminger, the movie producer, and he wanted me to write the book of a musical called ‘I Protest!’ He had these ideas for how the musical would [look] with young people carrying signs and everything—a Broadway musical…These were things that appalled me, to say the least.¹⁶³

Even the less gauche invitations made Goldstein uncomfortable. He was invited to a Senator’s home for Christmas. He remembers feeling out of place:

> My father used to write Christmas cards to this guy. Not Christmas cards, Jewish New Year’s cards, wishing him a happy New Year, hoping he’d promote him in the post office. And there I was in the guy’s living room. I had no idea how to talk to these people. I had no idea how to relate to them. I was terrified of them. And I hated them. And mistrusted them. I basically kept my small circle of friends and the musicians, whom I did trust. But it made it very hard to be authentic.¹⁶⁴

He even met his long-time idol, Susan Sontag, who compared him to a young Marcel Proust—a comparison that Richard Goldstein felt was an insult. Though the German writer was a star talent and like Goldstein in his generational alienation, he was also considered pedantic and self-indulgent.¹⁶⁵ Meeting the people he looked up to often proved to be disappointing.

¹⁶² Ibid

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

He found himself spending more and more time hanging out with rock stars, which also affected him. “I spent four days with Janis Joplin on a tour,” he remembers, “or I could be with the Doors at a recording session all day. I got pretty friendly with [Jim] Morrison, actually. I liked him very much. He was an alcoholic.”

Substance abuse was a common problem among those Goldstein met as he entered rock’s inner circles, and its effects were often upsetting for Goldstein to observe. He speaks of his friend Janis Joplin’s heroin addiction, which ultimately led to her death from an overdose:

The thing seemed so corrupt to me. Negligent. I mean, her friends didn’t protect her. And the other thing is that she, her manager, Albert Grossman—this is potentially libelous, so I warn you up front about this material, even though he’s dead now, I’m pretty sure—was the dealer for his clients. Dylan, the Band—they were all junkies. And he held them to him through drugs. So, I’m pretty sure that he was the person who secured her relationship with heroin. I’m not really certain.

Goldstein had been an idealist about rock as a fan, and it was emotionally damaging to him to see the darkest aspects of the industry. This had a cooling effect on his passion for the work.

Additionally, Goldstein’s career-long concern with commercialism was becoming crippling, especially as he perceived it to be growing more prominent in the pop music business than ever. “Music was becoming stylized,” he says. “And it became industrialized very quickly.”

Troublingly, he saw a shift occurring within

166 Goldstein, interview.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
his own life that was similar to the changes overtaking the music industry. He admits of himself, “It was impossible not to grow slick after a while.”

He became a fixture in the ultra-fashionable New York art scene. He recalls,

I had all this clothing, the silver boots that I wore and all of that. But I was very awkward under it and I think it was as much a protective device. I wore granny glasses that didn’t have any lens prescription because I didn’t need glasses. And learned from Andy Warhol how to speak without saying anything. You know, “Oh, wow!” and things like that. I watched him very closely.

As he became more and more hip, Goldstein felt increasingly at odds with himself. He had begun his career by emphasizing that he was an ordinary fan, just one of the kids. Now he was writing for “breakfast table” periodicals, publications that were hustling to tap into the youth market. He was rubbing elbows with senators and meeting his idols.

Goldstein remembers, “It was very hard to actually hold on to my original [inspiration]—which was the music and the fans and the scene—in the midst of all this. It was very hard.” He felt hip, but transparent and exposed: “I remember once I had a Noguchi Lamp in my apartment. I remember once looking at it and thinking, I’m like this lamp. I’m a paper shade with a fluorescent light inside it. That’s what I am, you know. And I really became sort of horrified.” He was realizing, along with

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
others of his generation, that “if there was a 'counterculture,' it was deeply implicated in commercial, entrepreneurial society.”

Goldstein had always thought of what he was doing as pure, as though if he were true to the music he could remain outside of the pressures of the culture production machine. But he couldn’t and it distressed him. This is a sign of his naivety, but also of his intentions in writing about rock. He always thought of his role as a rock critic as “making the revolution.” His political and cultural goals were connected as intimately as the music and the movement was. This meant that the personal crisis he experienced as the Sixties devolved into violence and disillusionment had professional ramifications for Goldstein.

Just as he became friends with cultural stars, he also met political leaders within the New Left. They left him as cold as the mainstream politicians did, for the most part. For instance, when he met Mark Rudd in 1968, he remembers, “He called me a honky. He called me a fascist. And I said, ‘Why are you calling me a fascist?’ He said, ‘You didn’t like Sgt. Pepper.’ So, that’s an example of how bizarre the left thinking was in those days.” Meanwhile, as he was becoming disenchanted with


174 Goldstein, interview.

175 Ibid.
the movement’s leaders, he was also becoming worried as “[t]he hippie culture basically collapsed and the movement got extremely violent.” 176

He witnessed this violence first-hand, taking part in protests and reporting on them for the Village Voice. Goldstein explains, “we had a tradition of bloody press cards hanging in the editor’s office as a mark of honor. The paper issued helmets.” 177 Encouraged by the paper to write from the center of the political fray, Goldstein had ramped up his involvement in demonstrations. When reporting on the Columbia University sit-ins, for example, Goldstein had to jump out of a second-story window to elude pursuing police. In fact, the Voice even ran an advertisement in the New York Times throughout 1968 and 1969 that referred to Goldstein to shore up the paper’s radical bona fides. It read,  
Every Thursday, the establishment shudders a little. Because every Thursday, a new issue of the Village Voice appears. Every week, somebody sighs. Or blushes. Or grits his teeth. Because of Nat Hentoff’s Review of the Press, and the limits of freedom on the dailies’ editorial desks. Or Jack Newfield’s latest story on the newest insurgencies around the country. Or Richard Goldstein and the painful post-graduate education he got from the Tactical Police Force at Columbia...The Village Voice tells the stories that the Establishment leaves out. Frankly, they’re not always nice. But we believe you ought to have the chance to make your own value judgments. 178

The paper not only supported political activism, it made it central to the message it was sending about itself to potential readers. For Goldstein, this meant that he had free reign to bring his politics into his “Pop Eye” column. He continued writing

176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
music criticism, but his work reflected his increasing involvement with the movement as it intensified. His cultural work became more brazenly anti-authoritarian. He had shifted from trying to get authorities to understand the counterculture to openly defying them.

1968 marked the end of his career as a rock critic—at least within own his mind, though he did continue to write about the form intermittently thereafter—largely because of troubling events whose shockwaves that effected his personal life and his career. The traumas of 1968 also inspired two of his best and most enduring “Pop Eye” articles, based on his involvement in organizing the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Committee in Chicago. It was the peak of his involvement in the Sixties movement and his psychological undoing. He was at the center of a historical moment that not only changed public opinion about countercultural politics, but his own worldview as well. It prompted him to seriously assess the youth culture that he represented in his articles and his devotion to it. Only tangentially rock related, the articles show that Goldstein’s commitment was not as much to rock sounds anymore as it was to using rock as a lens through which to engage larger cultural questions.

The buildup to the disastrous events in Chicago were long, complicated, and reflective of many of the wider tensions in the Left at the time. The 1968 DNC protests marked a shift in the loose affiliation of organizations in “the movement.” Groups that had clashed over ideology and logistics agreed that their common enemy was the war in Vietnam and the American government that supported it. Calling
itself the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, or “the Mobe” for short, the coalition formed in 1967. Its first project was the March on the Pentagon, which numbered 150,000 strong. In early 1968, the Mobe began planning an action at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The activists wanted to show the Democratic Party that young liberals felt betrayed by their support for the war and call for change.

There were two main groups in the Mobe, who alternately clashed and cooperated. One was the SDS, led by Dave Dellinger and Tom Hayden, which was the more prominent part of the coalition. They were the radicalized successors to the Old Left, coming from the same ideological background, but more adamant about the necessity of revolutionary change as opposed to working within the established political system. In the other corner of the Mobe were the Yippies. This radical activist group, led by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, wanted a cultural revolution focused on youth power and a new style of public engagement. The Yippies represented the long-sought after union between the hippie counterculture and political activism. This was the perfect combination for Goldstein’s personality, and by 1968 he was involved enough in the organization that Sixties historian David Farber would later refer to him as “a New York Times music critic and part time

179 Allen Ginsberg, for example, had been exhorting the cultural and political wings of the movement to join together for years, and he hailed the Yippies as having taken up this mantle. David R. Farber, Chicago ’68 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 29.
Yip.” He found himself spending time at the Yippies’ Village headquarters, and soon he had become an important part of the cultural side of the group.

When the Yippies joined the Mobe, Goldstein was put in charge of organizing the music for the event, eventually convincing bands including Country Joe and the Fish to play for the gathered protesters. He also became involved in the long and contentious negotiations between the Mobe and the City of Chicago in the lead-up to the demonstration. The issue was permits; the Mobe wanted to ensure the safety of the demonstrators that would pour into Chicago for the event, but it was difficult to get the city to agree to their plans. 1968 was a bad year for law and order in large cities, and Chicago was the only major metropolitan area in the country not to have had a riot in 1968, even in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s April assassination, when over one hundred American cities experienced them. Chicago’s powerful machine boss, Mayor Daley, had used the findings of the Kerner Commission’s government-backed inquiry into the riots as a model for his revamped police force. They were now more integrated, and highly trained in the latest crowd control and non-lethal suppression methods. Still, Daley did not want to press his luck. Of concern to the city, says Farber, was the fact that the Mobes’ proposed demonstration route would cut through the black South Side of Chicago. There were fears that such a march could spark a riot in what was then the most racially segregated city in America.

180 Ibid, 49.
The Mobe protested. In August, a contingent including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Richard Goldstein, and Ed Sanders of the Fugs were accompanied by a *Look* magazine photographer as they met with the deputy mayor to discuss the issue of permits. The meeting turned heated and solved nothing; later, there was another massive row between the Yippie and SDS factions of the Mobe over whether the event should go on at all. Abe Peck, head of the Chicago Yips, wrote to Hoffman, “If you’re coming to Chicago, be sure to wear some armor in your hair.” Nonetheless, they decided that the protest would proceed with or without official support.

Hoffman began rearranging the schedule accordingly: Tuesday would now be “care-for-the-wounded” day.

Because he experienced the volatility of the planning stages, Goldstein went to the convention afraid of what would happen. He communicated his dread in his compelling account of the events for “Pop Eye.” He wrote,

I brought the Fear out with me from New York, a white plastic helmet and a bottle of Vaseline. The same fear that built the fences, and erected the barricades, and brought all those soldiers in from Texas. Touch-fear: the kind that burns when you tap its roots. And this fear was worse than paranoia, because it involved no element of persecution, but only a gnawing awareness of inner dread.

I invoke these anxiety-obsessions now, under the pretext of relevance. If you want to experience the ecstasy of street-turmoil, you must first understand the reality of fear. Because no one could have come to Chicago without first fighting in his head the battle he would later fight in the streets...

181 Farber, *Chicago*, 49.

182 Ibid.

Indeed, Goldstein had an idea of what he was getting into before he even got to Chicago, and not just because he was a part of the shambolic preparations. He was a longtime veteran of protests by this point, having regularly engaged in demonstrations and protests since the early 1960s. The Vaseline? Protection in case of smoke bombs or tear gas, which Goldstein had encountered before. The white helmet was Village Voice issue, and reporters were admired at the paper for any injuries sustained while covering protests.

In Chicago, though, the tension was high even for a demonstration. The scene quickly turned violent, and Goldstein was in the middle of it. Even the bands ended up getting clubbed, he says. He described the tense scene,

We were standing together in Lincoln Park, not long after curfew on Tuesday night, watching an unbroken line of police. Around us were 1000 insurgents: hippies, Marxists, tourists, reporters, Panthers, Angels, and a phalanx of concerned ministers, gathered around a 12-foot cross. Occasionally a cluster of kids would break away from the rally to watch the formation in the distance. They spoke quietly, rubbing cream on their faces, and knotting dampened undershirts around their mouths. Not all their accoutrements were defensive. I saw saps and smoke bombs, steel-tipped boots and fistfuls of tacks. My friend pulled out a small canister from his pocket. "Liquid pepper," he explained. Watching these kids gather sticks and stones, I realized how far we have come from that mythical summer when everyone dropped acid, sat under a tree, and communed.\textsuperscript{184}

The violence of the movement had become too much for Goldstein to handle.

Chicago gave Goldstein the chance to reflect on the movement and his commitment to it. He had hoped to change the world by non-violent means, by a revolution of

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
consciousness. By 1968, he says, the movement had become “violent and apocalyptic,” and “as the country grew more violent, it became harder to think that this was a good thing.”

He saw the same doubts and fears that he was experiencing reflected in the faces of the police with whom the protesters were in a standoff. He wrote,

At first, all that equipment seemed flattering. But then you saw under the helmets, and the phallic weaponry, and you felt the fear again. Immigrant to stranger, cop to civilian, old man to kid. The fear that brought the people of Chicago out into the streets during Martin Luther King's open housing march, now reflected in the fists of these cops. The fear that made the people of Gage Park spit at priests, and throw stones at nuns, now authorized to kill. And you realized that the cops weren't putting on that display for you; no -- a cop's gun is his security blanket, just as Vaseline was yours.

There was a pervasive sorrow to his writing around this time that reflected his inner conflict. Goldstein’s writing had always been highly personal, and this was true even in his despair. Once, he had been a hopeful idealist, but he and the culture he was a part of had come a long way from the enthusiasm he had felt during his initial outing as a critic to a Shea stadium concert. He had become frightened and bitter, and as always, his subjectivity put these emotions at the center of his writing.

Goldstein wasn’t alone in his feelings. Farber writes, “Chicago ’68 was seen by almost all who participated in it and by most of those who watched it on TV as more than just another protest marked by violence, intolerance, and excess. Chicago

185 Goldstein, interview.

186 Ibid.
'68 marked a crisis in the nation’s political and cultural order.” Chicago was the final straw for a mentally haggard Goldstein. He no longer believed in the possibility of change. Because his cultural work was so tied to his political idealism, it was the death knell of his career as a rock journalist.

He wrote to Allen Ginsberg, “After Chicago, I couldn’t listen to a rock record for weeks. It just didn't seem enough anymore.” With the events of 1968, Goldstein gave up his dream of revolution and was forced to come to terms with the fact that the music wasn’t enough to “make the revolution”; it wasn’t nearly enough. This realization traumatized Goldstein as much as the actual events of the DNC. For Goldstein, the links between his cultural and political goals were so strong that as he lost faith in the movement, he found his cultural work unsustainable.

An article from October 1968 on Country Joe and the Fish captures Goldstein’s disillusionment and how it came through in his rock writing. He betrayed his own feelings when he asked Country Joe, "Why isn't there going to be a revolution?" He tried to put his finger on what had been lost, writing,

I asked Joe why his music had changed. He straightened up slowly and took off his hat. "See, we're not what we thought we were."

"How so?"

187 Farber, *Chicago*, xiii.

188 Richard Goldstein letter to Allen Ginsberg, Allen Ginsberg papers, M0733. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

"Well, two years ago, we believed in music like a God…but music's nothing to believe in. I mean...it's just sound."

"Do you feel like quitting now?"

"No. I still dig playing. If it got really bad, I couldn't even get up on stage. But today, the only emotion I associate with music is pleasure. There used to be all kinds of...well...connotations."190

The tone of this piece was a far cry from the almost palpable enthusiasm that characterized Goldstein’s early work. The defeat in Fish’s tone is matched by Goldstein’s own melancholy. He had the same high hopes for rock, and the same sense of disappointment when its promises of change failed to pan out.

He had spent the first few years of his career championing rock as a mode of personal and political expression for what he saw as a cohesive movement of youths. Fans like him believed that rock could spread consciousness and initiate a positive transformation of American life. However, as the country did begin to change, Goldstein saw that the alterations were not all good. Some were even terrifying. He began to wonder whether he was still fighting the good fight. Ulf Lindberg’s Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-headed Cruisers explains, “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.”191

The fact that Goldstein believed so strongly in the possibility of change and the

ability of rock music to spur that change seems “unquestionably naïve today,” says Lindberg.\(^{192}\)

The same charge has been made of the Sixties youth movement in general, and certainly the idealism and hopefulness of the generation looks different with the perspective of time. But although the cultural revolution never materialized, there were very real changes in American culture that came of the rebellion of the period. Arthur Marwick explains that the naivety of the true believers was essential to effect these:

'[F]utile' protest...overtly aiming at changing 'the system' (actually, given the complex way in which society had evolved, an impossibility) and sometimes extremely violent, is central to the Long Sixties as a closed period of great drama and excitement. ['Fruitful’ protest], generally non-violent, and aiming at removing specific abuses, is central to the cultural revolution as a permanent transformation in relations between men and women, adults and children, blacks and whites, provinces and metropoles, in lifestyles, and in the abolition of the furtiveness and guilt that surrounded sex in the 1940s and 1950s. In practice, the two types of protest were closely interrelated; there being no golden ages, it was probably impossible to have one without the other.\(^{193}\)

Idealists like Goldstein often seem naïve now, but they were a crucial part of the leftward thrust toward personal liberation and social justice.

His enthusiasm was not only a product of his time, but also of his age. Simon Frith says, “People’s heaviest personal investment in popular music is when they are teenagers and young adults—music then ties into a particular kind of emotional

\(^{192}\) Ibid, ix.

\(^{193}\) Marwick, 782.
turbulence, when issues of individual identity and social place, the control of public and private feelings, are at a premium.”

The combination of the optimism of the age and that of Goldstein’s youthful spirit created a result that often fell “somewhere between cultural demagoguery and hebephrenia, a sort of post-adolescent fan frenzy,” writes Robert Christgau. He goes on to say, “a lot of this writing is more interesting as cultural sample than as criticism, representing as it does a kind of generational exploration in an art preserve the writers correctly regard as their own.”

Certainly, that was the case with Goldstein, with his articles serving as artifacts of not just the culture, but also the buoyant spirit of the era. The enthusiasm that Goldstein displays dates his articles, but it also is part of what makes them valuable historical sources. Ulf Lindberg, et al, write, “Goldstein’ articles and columns in *The Village Voice*...trace a passage from hopeful expectation to disillusionment that some will read as a reluctant and overdue maturing and others as a tragic or at least melancholy adjustment to historical reality.”

If he failed in his goal of revolution, he certainly fulfilled his goal of emulating Whitman’s classic line: “I am the man, I suffered, I was there.”

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196 Lindberg, ix.

He was also successful in his efforts to change the American public’s perception of rock. Rock’s fortunes had improved since 1966, when Goldstein first began promoting it as an art. The music and its surrounding culture had undergone major changes in the few years Goldstein wrote for the Village Voice, just like the rest of the country. Not all of these changes were viewed positively by Goldstein. Rock was finally getting recognition from mainstream culture and adult authorities as a valid form. However, in the process, troublesome changes were occurring within the music. Much of it was becoming industrialized and slick, far from the authentic mode of expression Goldstein had idealized. Meanwhile, rock did get new admirers amongst cultural authorities, but Goldstein was put off by them. It seemed too little, too late. New appreciators liked the glossy version of the music, which, in his opinion, was an adulterated version of the genre. Goldstein bridled against their embrace of the music, rather than celebrating its successful entrée into the mainstream culture. Goldstein believed that commercial products could be art, but he also recognized that commercial interests were able to interfere with authentic expression.

Goldstein was part of the reason conceptions of the music had changed, as one of a group of young cultural critics who were determined to reshape the institutions they inherited. He did so not just through his ideological attacks on frozen cultural hierarchies, but also through his New Journalism style. He blurred the line between observer and participant, advocating for the youth culture in a way only someone who was a part of it could. His role was as an ambassador or
representative—someone who as a member of the community he reported on was deeply invested in it.

Goldstein was successful as a champion of the music of his generation, and he, along with the field he pioneered, had become a huge cultural force. His psyche, though, was worse for the wear. By 1969, he had stood alone as a champion of rock when few were listening, had challenged the musical establishment when few dared, had put his body on the line at protests, and gotten psychological scars in the process. The music that propelled his work had changed, the culture had changed, and he had too. His animating force, his passion for the music, had waned because of both internal and external forces. Goldstein no longer believed in rock’s promises, nor the promises of the movement. He was losing touch with his original ideals and even his sense of self. By the time he decided that he could no longer write about rock and roll, there were dozens of eager young writers—as excited about new music as Goldstein had been in 1966—to rush in and fill the void.

One of the writers who joined the fray was a woman, Ellen Willis. She was the first female rock journalist, and her feminist point of view broadened the scope of rock music and its criticism. Like Goldstein, she was a radical who was fundamentally committed to cultural activism as a vehicle for social change. She took rock as seriously as Goldstein did, believing it was a crucial part of the Sixties’ challenge to the status quo.

Whereas Goldstein’s seriousness about rock was balanced by his colorful descriptions and evocative language, Willis was a much more staunchly cerebral,
earnest writer. She wrote for the New Yorker, and her high-quality, thought-provoking work was suited to the respectable publication. She was not without humor or levity, but on the whole, her legacy was to elevate the level of discourse around rock and roll to new heights. She was more sophisticated than Goldstein, but then again she was more sophisticated than any rock critic. Her refined writing and mental acuity inspired other rock critics, including Goldstein, to treat rock music with more intellectual rigor than ever before.
Chapter Four: Ellen Willis

Ellen Willis was one of the first rock critics, beginning her career only a year after Goldstein’s “Pop Eye” debuted, and she was the first female rock critic ever. When Ellen Willis launched to widespread renown as the *New Yorker*’s regular rock critic, rock music was still widely denigrated, considered by many to be unsophisticated music for kids, devoid of meaningful musical or cultural value. Willis believed that rock and roll deserved respect as an artistic outlet for the youth generation. She recognized that worn out categories of cultural assessment were not reflective of what rock music meant to her and many other young Americans.

Writing for the *New Yorker* and other publications throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, she celebrated the genre, explaining its artistic value and the immense cultural changes it had initiated to her largely middlebrow audience. She was a radical activist, an astute cultural critic, and an important public intellectual. Willis elevated the level of discourse around rock and roll more than any other writer of her generation. She produced thoughtful writing about rock that proved it stood up to rigorous intellectual treatment. In doing so, brought her radical leftist and feminist views to the genre and permanently raised the bar of rock and roll discourse.

In making her case for rock’s importance, she was careful not to couch her assertions of the music’s merits in worn-out arguments about artistic worth. She spoke the language of high culture, but rejected elitist approaches to culture. The
literary quality of her work and complexity of her thought raised the tone of rock criticism. She wrote less frequently and to a smaller audience than some of her colleagues working in the rock criticism’s earliest days, but she made a lasting impression nonetheless. She wanted to convince her readers to give rock music a chance because she believed that it was important to culture and society, and also because it was an important part of her own life.

She entered the profession at a time when she was just beginning to find her voice as a radical, and she used her platform as a rock writer to explore the transformative role rock and roll played in a rapidly changing American culture. She brought her radical political views to her work in a way that made it as much social activism as cultural commentary. Willis was a civil rights activist, a participant in the Free Speech Movement, and a feminist, and each of these aspects of her life informed her work. In a letter from 1969, she summed up her approach to writing:

For many of us who happen to be literate—we just grewed up that way—this faculty is as much a burden as an asset. We have a saying: ‘Good writing is counterrevolutionary.’ It is a reminder that lit is basically an activity of mandarins; that it is all too easy for a writer to start thinking like a mandarin; that literary mandarins will be eager to recruit us, since there are too few good writers around. It is an exhortation not to glory in literacy as an end in itself, but to use it responsibly. And by ‘responsibility’ I don’t mean judiciousness, intellectual respectability or the balanced view. I mean responsibility to our fellows and our struggle.¹

She took her political convictions seriously, allowing them to shape her writing and actions throughout her life. Like others of her generation, her perspectives on the various topics she wrote about developed over her career, changing with the times. Her political growth was reflected in her writing, particularly her radicalizing views on youth culture, women’s liberation, and activism. For her, culture and politics were inextricably linked, particularly for rock music, which was hyper-socially conscious at the time she was writing.

She believed in the cultural importance of rock music, but she also understood that its power to change culture was limited by the counterculture’s lack of a real vision for political and economic transformation. Whereas other writers like Richard Goldstein believed music could be intrinsically revolutionary, Willis saw a disconnect between the ideals espoused by the rock and roll counterculture and the commitment of artists and fans to turn calls for change into meaningful action. In her role as a cultural critic, she challenged the complacency of her generation wherever she found it, and was quick to point out what she viewed as hypocrisy between their actions and ideals.

She also pushed for rock culture to be more reflective of democratic ideals regarding gender. As the first woman to break into what Richard Goldstein would later term the “boys club” of rock writers, her approach to gender and sexuality reflected her feminist viewpoint. Major topics she tackled included women's

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2 Sasha Frere Jones, Obituary of Ellen Willis, *New Yorker* (November 20, 2006).
objectification in rock and roll culture, female musicians' treatment in the industry and by the media, and the changes feminism was affecting in popular culture. She hoped that her work in this area would help to broaden opportunities for women and change the way women were discussed (or sometimes ignored) in rock writing.

Willis’ background provides clues to what she valued about popular music as well as how it affected her personally, both of which would be essential parts of her rock writing. Her intellectual growth over the course of her youth charts a path that would culminate in her influential writing. She wrote letters prolifically throughout her childhood and into adulthood that have been preserved at Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, along with her journals, correspondence, and unpublished writing; these sources offer insights into her development as an intellectual and cultural critic.

Ellen Willis was born December 14, 1941 and grew up in Queens, New York. She was the daughter of a NYPD officer and a homemaker mother, and the eldest of three children. Unlike some others of her generation, her relationship with her parents was generally intellectually simpatico. Willis noted in a 1959 letter that the assumption that rock and roll only appealed to young people did not hold true in her home, as her parents appreciated the music as well. They recognized the validity of the form and provided a useful sounding board for her musings on rock throughout her formative years. The confidence evident in even her earliest works of rock criticism grew out of this nurturing environment.

Similarly, her parents were also interested in and supportive of Willis’ political development, being politically oriented themselves. In 1967, she wrote of
her father, “he is...an intellectual with a well-developed sense of irony (and an ex-
thirties activist, besides).” Baby boomers who grew up with parents who were
active in 1930s politics “took from their parents an interest in activism and a certain
degree of comfort with nonconformity.” For Willis, this created “an environment of
intellectual and political sophistication,” contributing to her self-assurance as she
began writing about such topics professionally.

Her passion for writing was a consistent feature of Willis’ personal
development long before it became her profession. After she graduated high school
in 1959, she attended Barnard College in New York City, majoring in English.
During her time there, she won a position in 1960 as a guest editor at Mademoiselle,
one of a handful of young women selected from across the country to participate in a
journalism training program. It was the same program that Sylvia Plath was a part of
in 1953, as immortalized in her semi-autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar.

Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

4 Flamm, Michael W., and David Steigerwald. Debating the 1960s: Liberal,
Conservative, and Radical Perspectives (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield,
2008), 11

5 Ibid.

6 Started in 1939, the program invited “the women whose writing and
artwork were the best of the best” to work on its popular annual college issue. Before
it ended in the 1970s, the program boasted alums including Plath, author and literary
journalist Joan Didion, and literary critic Francine du Plessix Gray. (Alex Witchel,
Each participant in the program wrote a short article in which they conducted an interview with a public figure whom they admired. It was in keeping with her lifelong passion for social justice that she chose to conduct her Q & A with trailblazing African American writer Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, made its Broadway debut in 1959 and captured the mood of the nation amid the Civil Rights Movement. Willis’ interview with Hansberry is serious and thoughtful. It features many of the themes that mark her distinctive approach to cultural criticism.

She wrote, “Miss Hansberry…contends that to classify her play as ‘social drama’ is to use an artificial category. ‘All art is a bit political. When you deal with human relationships you are dealing with social relationships.’”7 “Artificial categories” of culture would be a major concern for Willis as she became a critic, and she believed it was important to regard these categories as adaptable. To her, it was the critic’s job to push them to keep up with changes in the culture, not to treat culture as stable and constant. In addition, the idea that “All art is a bit political” would echo in Willis’ work throughout her career, as she brought her politics into every work of music criticism she wrote.

In the same article, Willis also challenged the notion that people her age were politically apathetic. She wrote, “I just don’t agree that my generation has no

causes.” When she and Hansberry discussed the supposed “apathy” of young people, Willis pointed out the hypocrisy of college authorities who decried the “silent generation” while stifling dissent on their own campuses. An excerpt from the article exhibits the tone and feeling of Willis’ debut:

The “apathy” of today’s young people is imposed on them, [Hansberry] said, noting that the same college authorities who decry the “silent generation” stifle dissent on their own campuses. She lauded the Northern students’ recent concern for the plight of the Southern Negro as evidence of “a new vitality in our youth.” When I asked what presidential candidate would do the most for civil rights, she smiled, murmured wistfully, “Lincoln.”

Using her cultural criticism to shine light on causes she believed in was a constant in her career. Her declarations that her generation was being underestimated by adults were like those of other cultural observers, who were beginning to sense a change in the air. In 1960, the same year that Willis interned at Mademoiselle, preeminent public intellectual and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that in America,

new forces, new energies, new values are straining for expression and for release... As yet, the feeling is inchoate and elusive. But it is beginning to manifest itself in a multitude of ways: in freshening attitudes in politics; in a new acerbity in criticism; in stirrings, often tinged with desperation, among the youth; in a spreading contempt everywhere for reigning clichés.

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Willis embodied this shift, and her quest to find a meaningful way to direct these energies in her life was typical of many of her era. In this way, the voice she brought to her readers was representative her generation.

With a Barnard degree, a handful of articles in her resume, and a published book (*Questions Freshmen Ask*, a straightforward guide for new college students) on her résumé, Willis gained admission to one of the country’s best graduate schools, the University of California at Berkeley. She went to study Comparative Literature, but like many intellectuals of her generation, her academic focus took a backseat to her growing involvement in radical politics. She arrived in Berkeley in 1962, just in time to take part in the bloom of San Francisco’s Civil Rights Movement and the birth of the Free Speech Movement. She discovered her real passion in activism rather than academics:

> I went out to Berkeley to go to graduate school, supposedly, but I ended up spending all my time on political stuff—civil rights, mostly, and the Free Speech Movement. I stuck it out in school for three semesters, then it dawned on me that I really didn’t want to be an academic—that was just what [Barnard] told me I should want.\(^\text{12}\)

The appeal of the movement in Berkeley and her long-term interest in political issues converged with “the spirit, the excitement, the youth and idealism of the Kennedy government” to spur Willis to action.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

Willis was part of a broader shift in American youth politics that was largely centered around universities and the political activism erupting on campuses. Her identification with the New Left came to define her politics, which became an important part of her cultural writing, whether she was subscribing to its ideology or criticizing its shortcomings. Berkeley in the early 1960s was a hotbed of the movement, and Willis was just one of many young people who found themselves permanently changed by it. From 1963-1964, demonstrations throughout the Bay Area drew heavily from local college populations. Approximately ten percent of Berkeley’s student population was involved in some sort of civil rights agitation.\textsuperscript{14}

Willis wrote of her experience:

\begin{quote}
It was good for me. I never realized till I went out there how conventional I was. It was as if all my life I’d been wearing these tight clothes, just taking them for granted, and suddenly all these people were saying ‘Hey, you can take those off, you know…’ I had all these radical ideas, but I’d never really done anything about them.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Willis began participating in sit-ins and demonstrations at businesses that practiced hiring discrimination, most prominently at Bank of America. She and her husband, Harvey, also became involved in the Bay Area “student revolt,” as Willis termed the Free Speech Movement.\textsuperscript{16} She wrote home about her experiences in June of 1964,

\begin{quote}
CORE has been manning a marathon round-the-clock picket in front of City Hall to protest the injustices at the sit-in trials. We have been on the line
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{15} Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; Unpublished novel, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
almost every day. (Harvey sat in on several of the trials and was really amazed at the amount of bias the judges showed.) Sunday night we were on the overnight shift from midnight to 7 A.M., and our feet are still pretty sore…We have also been picketing Bank of America and it has had good results already.  

Though her letters home were cheerful about her experiences, her growing radicalism was upending her life:

In Berkeley I realized I had these two compartments in my mind—one for ideas and one for real life. Getting arrested in the Free Speech sit-in was a big deal for me. I knew it would really disturb my parents. A police record! Have whatever ideas you want, for God’s sake, but don’t get in trouble with the law!  

As the months of her tenure in the Bay Area progressed, she moved further from the mainstream to an alternative subculture. She wrote in her autobiographical novel:

The night of the sit-in was the first time I ever smoked grass. And then I dropped out of school when I could have gotten a master’s if I’d finished one more semester. I just stopped going to classes.Stopped working on my papers…I listened to music. Played the guitar. Stood in U.C. corner and read magazines. Registered Negros so they could vote for the fair housing law. I’m glad I did it,” she said, with a trace of defiance—or was it just defensiveness? “I don’t regret any of it. But I can’t say I really enjoyed it. In fact, I had sort of a nervous breakdown. Or something. I’m not sure exactly what you’d call it.

It was hard to describe. I think it started almost as soon as I got out West. I didn’t know anybody, I hated graduate school, I felt totally out of it. it was like Berkeley was this wonderful three-ring circus, and all I could think of to do was to sit in the audience. The only time I ever shook that feeling was during the Free Speech Movement. I remember thinking, ‘This feels real.’ It

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was the first time I’d thought of it in those terms, in so many words—my life didn’t feel real. I was going through the motions.  

Her internal struggle reflected the wide-ranging changes she and other young people were dealing with at the time. Her mentality was shifting from one oriented around traditional values (her Ivy League education, early marriage, and restrained social rebellion) to one that reflected the possibilities of life in a new, liberated culture. In this, Willis was representative of a certain subset of her generation, who like her came from within the white middle class and made the turn toward radicalism in the Sixties.

Willis’ political awakening took on an additional sense of urgency with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. She described “a pall over the whole city” that made “the routines of daily life, even eating, seem irrelevant and frivolous.” She told her family:

We awoke today to the news of Oswald’s death—a development making the whole thing blacker and more imprisoning, as if the shot that hit Kennedy had started a chain reaction from which there was no escape. I feel as if a hand is about to come out of the sky and destroy the South as totally corrupted.”

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
In the wake of the tragedy, she was overwhelmed by a sense of urgency that propelled her deeper into political involvement. She never lost this feeling, and political activism remained her primary motivating factor for the rest of her life.

Though she was invigorated by her activism, she ultimately decided not to pursue it as a profession. Later she recalled, “During the Free Speech Movement I thought, ‘This is it! I don’t need a career, I’ll be an activist.’ But the fact is I can take just so much politics before I start to get buggy. I was so bored at that meeting today I could hardly pay attention. My mind kept wandering.”

Willis had a hard time finding work that stimulated her intellectually in California.

A further strain was her sense that she was failing in her role as a young newlywed. Simple things like housekeeping and cooking weighed heavily on her. She felt as though she fell short as a housewife. She said, “When I quit school it got a lot worse. I used to sit in my apartment listening to records…” Music became an outlet for her frustrations and depression. Throughout her life it was very special to her, a way to work through her feelings and thoughts. Her personal connection to music came through in her writing, as she brought emotions and passions into her work.

By 1966, Willis’ relationship problems progressed to the point that she and Harvey divorced. This was at a time with a much lower divorce rate than today,

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23 Ibid.
which would have made it an even lonelier experience than divorce inevitably is anyway, and with a significant social stigma attached to it. She later wrote of the experience that she felt “some sense that my action was out of the ordinary. I even felt a bit defensive about not having a more melodramatic reason for leaving (It’s just that, well, I, uh, felt confined, we weren’t for each other, we had different ideas about things, you see…”). Willis was an early to second-wave feminism, which meant that many of the impulses and feelings she had about feminism were inchoate.

In a biographical 1969 article called “Up from Radicalism,” detailing her personal-political awakening, she wrote about this period from her post-feminist point of view. She called getting married her “diploma as a woman,” meaning it was something she felt that she had to do to fulfill her societal role as a woman. But she was never satisfied with the situation, and felt weighed down by pressure from both her husband and society to be a “good wife.” She was confronting many of the same emotions and frustrations as many other women of her generation, but she didn’t yet have the vocabulary or ideological framework through which to process or express how she felt. While her feminist ideology was still developing, she already possessed strong tendencies to act as she wanted in her personal life, despite pressures to remain traditional. Nonetheless, the emotional effects of the ordeal were difficult. The combined results of her personal and political experiences in her early twenties


became a watershed moment in her life, a chance for her to start anew without the constraints of the heavy social expectations she had placed on herself.

Willis chose to return home because, as she wrote, “New Yorkers always miss New York,” and settled in the Greenwich Village. She had to rebuild her life, as well as coming to terms with who she was after her divorce. Soon, she was meeting friends, dating, and eventually found her place in the hip New York arts community. She met a young radical, Robert Christgau, a dynamic up-and-coming writer who proved an enormous influence on her and later became one of the major figures in rock criticism in his own right. They began dating in 1967, and their relationship was a challenging and formative experience for both. In many ways, Christgau shaped Willis’ intellect, entering her life at a point when her mind was at its most unfettered and open. She was hungry for new thoughts and ideas and he was full of them.

In the novelized version of her life, their romance is depicted as being charged by continual, deep conversations about the movement, philosophy, and especially music. Christgau helped move her back toward her rock and roll obsession from the folk scene she had shifted to while she was in Berkeley. He introduced her to new records and bands, bringing her into the fold of the New York City art, rock, and writing scenes. In turn, he credits her with “radicalizing [him].


27 Robert Christgau, interview with the author, May 2011.
For years, her ideology was more developed than many around her.”28 She was exploring feminism, philosophy, radical politics, and began to “get into Marxist theory more than ever before.”29 Her radicalization accelerated during this period in her life.

She worked as an editor at a small magazine and experienced unequal treatment based on her gender.30 She was moderately successful as a freelance writer during this time, and she began outlining and researching several new projects. One project Willis pitched to Esquire was a day-in-the-life look at a New York City police precinct based on her father’s work. The piece was never published, but an editor’s notation on her proposal shows that the magazine was interested. However, it also demonstrates the sexism that Willis faced. The notation read: “Bob Christgau’s girl—and a good writer.”31 Though Willis had been writing professionally since she was in college, the editor reduced her to the role of a girlfriend. The notation did not simply read “a good writer” or even “A good writer (and Bob Christgau’s girl),” but placed primacy on her relationship with Christgau.

28 Robert Christgau, Remembrance of Ellen Willis (lecture presented at the conference, Sex, Hope, & Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Writings of Ellen Willis, New York University, April 30, 2011).


30 Ibid.

31 Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; Esquire Correspondence, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
In this and many of her experiences as a fledgling writer, she felt her gender was serious impediment to her opportunities and success.

In 1967, Willis began writing a long article about Bob Dylan that would establish her as a literary force in her own right. It was published in *Cheetah*, a Hearst-backed magazine aimed at the underground market.\(^{32}\) *Cheetah’s* editorial staff included Christgau, Richard Goldstein, and Willis, some of the key figures in the still-developing field of rock criticism. Alongside its reviews of rock, films, and art, the short-lived publication featured psychedelic imagery and articles about the hippie lifestyle. It folded after a little more than a year in publication, but was a jumping-off point for many young, hip writers.

Willis’ “Dylan” transcended the trendy tone of *Cheetah*.\(^{33}\) It became one of the most influential works of rock criticism ever written and launched Willis’ career as a music critic and public intellectual. Christgau credits “Dylan” as being “one of the founding documents of rock history.”\(^{34}\) In “Dylan,” Willis demonstrated many of the approaches that were hallmarks of her work. First was her serious approach to rock music. This does not mean seriousness of tone, although she often had that as

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\(^{32}\) “Entertainment industry executives...were uneasy about the political content of underground media, and, as the size of the youth market became apparent, launched media enterprises of their own. Slick magazines such as *Cheetah* and *Eye* were started to steal the underground’s thunder.” David Armstrong, *A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America*. (Los Angeles, Calif: J.P. Tarcher, 1981), 173.


\(^{34}\) Christgau at Willis Conference.
well. Rather, it refers to an approach to rock music that viewed it as important and worthy of thoughtful examination. This contrasted with most writing about rock at the time, as she noted extensively in her article.

Second, she challenged prevailing views of and approaches to rock, questioning the standards by which the music was judged. She thought that it should be evaluated on its own merits, free from rigid expectations of the form that were unresponsive to its artistic potential. In many ways, “Dylan” reads as a petition to the cultural establishment, using the language and ideas of high culture to argue for Bob Dylan’s importance as a cultural figure. She was writing for her fellow fans too, but the heft of her mental labor went to justifying Dylan’s value.

Finally, she took a long view of the development of rock, pinpointing the important musical, artistic, and social influences that formed its artistic backbone. Her histories of rock’s formation are so extensive and well-plotted that they read like mental exercises, as though she was working things out for herself in front of an audience. The effect was to draw the reader into the process of untangling rock’s context and meanings, and by doing so she conferred onto it a sense of importance as a genre. Each of these factors were constants in Willis’ writing about music, and thus “Dylan” is a quintessential example of her approach to rock and roll, as well as being characteristic of the influential changes that she brought to the genre of rock criticism.

From the beginning of her article, Willis sets herself apart from other writers with a respectful approach to her subject. Willis frames her argument as a challenge,
writing, “Some still discount Dylan as merely a popular culture hero (how can a
teen-age idol be a serious artist—at most, perhaps, a serious demagogue.)”35 This
was a signal that the ideas contained in her article would be aimed at least as much at
rock’s detractors as its fans. She sought to prove to them that he was a serious artist,
one whose emergence signaled a change in popular music. She declared, “As a
composer, interpreter, and most of all, a lyricist, Dylan has made a revolution.”36 Her
goal was to convince her readers that “serious ‘pop’ is serious art,”37 and Dylan was
proof of that.

Dylan was the vanguard of a new kind of pop musician, one that had more in
common with fine artists and poets than the typical teen idol. Even Dylan’s
alienation was an orchestrated act of his own design, part of what he was offering the
world as an artist. Willis wrote of him, “Not since Rimbaud said ‘I is another’ has an
artist been so obsessed with escaping identity. His masks hidden by other masks,
Dylan is the celebrity stalker’s ultimate antagonist.”38 Willis was interested in the
idea of masks, says Christgau, and he credits her with introducing this notion into
pop music discourse through her Dylan article.39 Masks in literature have long been


36 Ibid.

37 Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; correspondence, July 6, 1968, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass

38 Willis, “Dylan,” 2.

39 Christgau at Willis Conference.
a way to conceal identity, or to control it so that it served one’s art, and by bringing this theoretical trope into her music criticism, she helped to elevate the discourse around what Dylan was doing by manipulating his image.

She criticized her contemporaries for the prosaic questions they asked musicians, many of which were based on outmoded notions of how pop stars should be approached by critics. Previously, many recording artists sought to be relatable and accessible in their drive for widespread popularity. Reporters expected little depth from them, and they offered little.

Dylan brought a new depth to rock, and previous articles about him—from a serious biographical sketch in *Playboy* by jazz critic Nat Hentoff, to fluff pieces written for the teeny-bopper set—failed to adequately capture it. For Willis, it was naïvety or ignorance that prevented mainstream critics from understanding the intentionality of Dylan’s illusive approach to his art. She believed that “personality is every bit as much the ‘substance’ of what a performer has to offer as his music per se—this is especially true of someone like Dylan.”

He cultivated his image, spinning myths and truths about his origins into an ephemeral persona. Journalists’ inability to grasp Dylan’s persona signaled a lack of discernment, largely due to a failure to recognize the complexity of this new type of pop musician.

Willis lambasted reporters for their outmoded approaches, complaining, “Hentoff, like a housewife dusting her furniture while a tornado wrecks her house, pursued the homely fact through exchanges like, ‘Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?’” This was an example of the wrong kind of question to ask Dylan, the sort of milquetoast inquiry that made him purposely antagonistic toward the music press. Lines like these indicated to Dylan that the reporter was out-of-touch, and he used these opportunities to toy with such writers. Willis’ criticism of Hentoff’s article demonstrates her frustration with these writers who were unable to engage appropriately with Dylan’s enigmatic personality. By underestimating Dylan, many observers were rendered incapable of understanding and accurately reporting on his place in culture. In taking Dylan and his mythmaking seriously, Willis could understand and explain his cultural role.

Even if cultural critics liked Dylan’s music, they didn’t always grasp the depth of it or the meaning of the cultural changes it initiated. They were unable to hear him outside of the terms in which they were accustomed to considering music. This is what Willis found through her extensive research into previous writings about Bob Dylan, as she read and extensively notated every article about him that she could find. She filled a notebook with her observations, which is available in her archives, and it is evidence of the amount of careful thought that she put into her work. Of a 1966 *Look* article, Willis charged, “Typical adult kitschy patronizing of

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41 Willis, “Dylan,” 4
Dylan,” summing up her view of the field as it existed when she entered it.\textsuperscript{42} She quotes Stanley Kunitz, later a two-time Poet Laureate, “I listen with pleasure to Bob Dylan but I would term him a popular artist, a writer of verse rather than of poetry…interest taken in him is a healthy sign…no reason why popular art and a more selective, esoteric art can’t cheerfully coexist…popular art is the foundation on which fine art rests…”\textsuperscript{43} While taking an overall positive view of Dylan, Kunitz still made the distinction between “fine art” and “popular art,” placing pop music firmly below “more selective, esoteric art.”\textsuperscript{44} Willis disagreed. Comparing Dylan to Rimbaud and placing him within the “Gotterdammerung strain in modern literature,” she attempts to counter such rote dismissals by favorably comparing his music to art such authorities already accepted.\textsuperscript{45}

Willis quoted Louis Simpson, a Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry, “I don’t think B. Dylan is a poet at all, he is an entertainer—the word poet is used these days to describe practically anybody. I am not surprised, though, that American college students consider him their favorite poet—they don’t know anything about poetry.”\textsuperscript{46} Willis’ intellectual tone and acute criticism was itself a refutation of this derision.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; Bob Dylan research notebook, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Willis, “Dylan,” 16.

\textsuperscript{46} Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; Bob Dylan research notebook, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
and perhaps part of her seriousness of tone and frequent references to literary tropes were aimed at rebutting people like Simpson who disparaged rock fans as illiterate.

Though she was openly a fan of his music, she never slides into panegyric, always making her arguments in favor of Dylan’s importance in a well-reasoned and measured way. For instance, her proposal for the article noted, “he is verbally very gifted, but he is not a poet.”47 She believed that “[h]is genius is in the way he puts the elements of his songs together into a total experience.”48 She argued, “Dylan is no apostle of the electronic age.”49 In the margin of the proposal, Willis added, “and not profound thinker.”50 In 2011, preeminent pop critic Sasha Frere-Jones recalled reading Dylan as a curious youngster (and a non-Dylan fan), and appreciated the balance Willis brought to her criticism. “Willis liked Dylan, more than a little, and her statement about Dylan’s music was nestled inside a careful paragraph devoted to explaining what Dylan was and wasn’t good at.”51 Willis’ was a deliberate, yet openly appreciative, assessment of his talent. She wrote,

He is a fifth columnist from the past, shaped by personal and political non-conformity, by blues and modern poetry. He has imposed his commitment to individual freedom (and its obverse, isolation) on the hip passivity of pop

47 Ibid.

48 Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; Bob Dylan research notebook, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

culture, his literacy on an illiterate movement…His songs and public role are guides to survival in the world of the image, the cool, and the high.\textsuperscript{52} Willis speaks in terms of cultural hierarchy when she calls Dylan part of “the world of the…high.” She supports this claim with references to Dylan’s “modern poetry” and “literacy.” Later, she is more explicit, describing Dylan as “[a] voluntary refugee from middle-class life, more aesthete than activist, [with] less in common with the left than with literary rebels—Blake, Whitman, Rimbaud, Crane, Ginsberg.”\textsuperscript{53} Once again drawing a comparison between Dylan and Rimbaud, the enfant terrible of French letters, Willis positions Dylan in terms that would be understood and appreciated by readers with a knowledge of literature. The comparison was likely intended to appeal to Dylan’s more highbrow detractors rather than the typical rock fan, and thus she betrays her goal: to prove that Dylan was worthy of appreciation as serious art to those who doubted, as much as to shore up the fact that he mattered to those that already believed.

She asserted that Dylan had “made a revolution” in music—that it wasn’t just he, but the entire enterprise that necessitated a new approach—and to explain how, Willis took a long view of the cultural context from which he emerged.\textsuperscript{54} Though her writings would sometimes coincide with the release of new albums—as did “Dylan” with the release of 1967’s “John Wesley Harding”—her articles were not simply

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 3.
record reviews. She was interested in his albums’ historical context. She often did less straight-forward reviewing in her pieces than intellectually organizing and explaining the genre. In part, she was focused on rock history because it helped to establish a canon for the genre—its own canon, unbound from what was considered “worthy” music.

Cunicity had long been a part of traditional understandings of culture, functioning as a rule or measure of quality art. Highbrow critics used the traditional art music canon as a rubric by which to gauge artistic value. Music that fell outside of this narrow range (dictated primarily by form) was never accorded the respect given to classical music, nor were these forms considered worthy of their own canon. For many years after canonicity was conceived, it was reflective of upper-class tastes, centered primarily around Romantic-era art music, and slow to change.

According to musicologist Edward Komara, “[canonical] suggestions suggest norms, and norms suggest an appeal to some sort of authority.”55 Radicals of Willis’ generation rebelled against authority, as much in the cultural sphere as the political. By saying rock was worthy of its own canon, Willis asserted its value as an art form deserving of the same critical treatment of “higher” forms. This act was culturally radical, an attempt to tear down old cultural edifices and resurrecting them in a more responsive iteration.

Fighting rigid notions of canonicity meant fighting “the general assumption that most forms of popular culture are not substantial enough to respond to the same complex intellectual treatment that is regularly applied to canonical cultural texts,” writes cultural theorist Mikita Brottman. She continues,

The very concept of ‘the literary’ is always based on a series of exclusions that themselves assume an idea of culture as concerned with certain ‘high,’ ‘universal’ values that are not, in fact, static or independent, but random, ephemeral, and historically determinate. There will always be a cultural context in which the marginal is the mainstream, and vice versa. Moreover, the movement of any form of activity from cultural periphery to cultural center also involves a transformation in the very ‘essence’ of that activity. So the ‘essence’ of ‘high’ or ‘literary’ culture is in fact far from ahistorical; historicity invades the very nature of these modes of activity and their products. It is the fixity of the hierarchical scale of values, and the arbitrariness of its contents at any given point, which provide the scale with its particular power.

Willis’ challenge to cultural institutions was not an attempt to get a pass for Bob Dylan to the lofty heights of high culture. Rather it was an effort to convince her readers that the hierarchy itself was worn out and needed to be adapted to the realities of a new cultural moment. She created a discourse around the notions of high/low and pop/serious culture that supported her belief in the need for responsive cultural institutions, an idea that was connected to her core belief in the need for a more responsive democracy. The idea that rock had a rich history, that the story of its evolution and development was worthy of examining, was empowering to its


57 Ibid.
fans. It said, “This music that you make and consume—this music that matters to you and me—matters.”

Willis mapped a canon for rock music, using Dylan as her starting point. For Willis, the threads of rock’s musical development that brought it to such a point of cultural importance were represented perfectly in his career. As she unraveled these strands, she revealed elements that composed rock’s formative influences. In preparation for her article about Dylan, in addition to spending months reading every article she could find about the singer and painstakingly transcribing his lyrics by hand (a necessary chore at a time before lyrics were commonly published) she also drew models locating his place in music history. These were evidence of the careful thought and intellectual energy she put into her work, as well as clues to the way her she conceived of rock’s cultural importance.
She translated her visual representations of popular music's canon into complex yet digestible prose outlining the genre's development, leading up to and accounting for the emergence of Bob Dylan. This was one of the hallmarks of her style: the intellectual organizing and explaining of musical context. Willis’ historical interludes are rich with references to the various economic, social, and political factors that conceptions of pop as shallow and superficial belied. In an exemplary passage of this type, she writes,

Pure folk sound and idiom, in theory the expression of ordinary people, had become the province of middle-class dissidents who identified with the common man but whose attitude toward common men resembled that of White Russian expatriates toward the communized peasants. For them popular music—especially rock-and-roll—symbolized the displacement of the true folk by the mass. Rock was not created by the people but purveyed by the communications industry. The performer was incidental to engineer and publicity man. The beat was moronic, the lyrics banal teenage trivia. These were half-truths. From the beginning, there was a bottom-up as well as top-down movement in rock-and-roll: neighborhood kids formed groups and wrote songs; country singers adopted a rhythm-and-blues beat. Rock took a mechanized, acquisitive society for granted, yet in its own way it was protest music, uniting teenagers against adults’ lack of sympathy with youthful energy and love and sex. The mediocrity of most performers only made rock more “authentic”—anyone could sing it—and one of the few remaining vindications of the American dream—any kid from the slums might become a millionaire…Rock-and-roll was further from the grass roots than traditional music, but closer than any other kind of pop. If folk fans did not recognize this, the average adult did, and condemned the music for its adolescent surliness and its sexuality, covert in the lyrics, overt in the beat and in the intense response to idols.\(^58\)

\(^{58}\) Willis, “Dylan,” 12.
It reads almost as anthropology or sociology, with its analytical detachment and theoretical content. Class was an important part of Willis’ conception of pop music, as her references to “the mass,” “bottom up” movement, and “grass roots” show. Her perception of rock was fundamentally connected to her Marxist politics, and championing a popular expressive form was part of Willis’ radical activism.

The intricacy of Willis’ analysis, incorporating historical, philosophical, and social context, elevates the level of discussion about rock music. She believed strongly that art acted as an important mode of social and aesthetic expression. It was complicated and dismissing it as simplistic betrayed ignorance about its cultural complexities. Willis approached it methodically, seriously, and intellectually, applying the traditional tenets of cultural criticism to a form that was often dismissed as undeserving of such respectful treatment. In doing so, she pursued her political goals by challenging classism in the cultural sphere.

Her Dylan article has been touted as the piece that got her a plum job as the first ever pop music critic for the New Yorker, and it certainly marked her as an impressive critic of the genre right out of the gate.59 When she was hired in 1967, she was one of only a handful of music critics in the country and the only woman working in the profession. At the time she was hired, music criticism was “a boy’s

59 Sasha Frere Jones wrote of the article in Willis’ obituary, “‘Dylan,’ the piece written for Cheetah magazine that got her hired by The New Yorker in the first place, [was] her only piece of music writing at the time.” Sasha Frere-Jones “Opening the Vault,” New Yorker, May 10, 2011.
club,” according to Richard Goldstein. Historian David Armstrong agrees, writing that the rock and roll scene was “a man’s world” in the mid-Sixties. As a budding feminist, Willis injected a woman’s voice into this sphere. She also brought a radical intellectual voice to the pages of a high-quality, large circulation magazine, exposing an audience of mainstream American readers to a fresh take on rock music.

The *New Yorker* had a strong influence on American culture, so it was the perfect venue for Willis to make her cultural arguments. It was founded in 1925 by Harold Ross, a member of the famed Algonquin Round Table. Ross’s periodical initially mirrored the Round Table itself—delivering witticisms and highbrow humor to its subscribers who were mostly members of the upper-middle class, “affluent, educated urbanites.” According to chronicler Annalisa Zox-Weaver,

[Ross] imagined his weekly magazine as a stylish and humorous publication to which readers could turn for commentary on current events, literature, fashion, and culture, all delivered with a tone of self-conscious wit, irony, and not a little hauteur. It would be the unofficial organ of established society, a publication for those eager for a collective repudiation of piety and provincialism and attracted to its taste and discrimination.

Upon its founding, Ross said of his publication, “It will not be what is commonly called highbrow or radical. It will be what I commonly called sophisticated in that it

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60 Ibid.


63 Annalisa Zox-Weaver, “At Home with Hitler: Janet Flanner’s Führer Profiles for the ‘New Yorker,’” *New German Critique*, No. 102, (Fall, 2007): 103.
will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers.”64 If not
highbrow, the magazine’s philosophy was certainly elitist. As Ross went on to say,
“The New Yorker will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in
Dubuque. It will not be concerned with what she is thinking about.”65

The rank snobbery of such a statement, made so boldly by the magazine’s
founder, indicates the cultural approach of the New Yorker. However, despite its
pretensions, the reality was that the magazine was middlebrow, delivering glimpses
into high art and culture to the mass of aspirational middle-class Americans. In the
early Sixties, the magazine published some of the most influential essays written by
American intellectuals, including James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time, Hannah
Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem, and Michael Harrington’s The Other America.
These highly serious works were central to national conversations about social
issues, but were not sufficient to move the magazine from its middlebrow base. The
Sixties were “a cultural moment of intermingling between middlebrow and highbrow
with a shrewd sense of what the presence of genuine intellectuals in large-circulation
magazines meant for postwar American society.”66 What resulted was the booming
of upper-middlebrow content, written by intellectuals for dissemination to a large,
middle American audience.

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Books, 2009), 123.
The New Yorker’s hire of Ellen Willis catapulted her into a position to affect the way the part of the American population that considered itself culturally savvy viewed both cultural products and institutions. Because of the aspirational tone of the magazine and its middle-class subscriber base, the subject was exposed to a part of the population that otherwise might have missed or dismissed it. She devoted her career to gaining the widest possible audience for her message. She said,

Many radicals are convinced that it is impossible to express radical ideas in any but radical publications, that an alien context inevitably vitiates those ideas. I have always resisted this position because I want to reach a wider audience than a few thousand faithful.67

Her goal was to change American culture, not just to wax philosophical about her favorite music.

She brought a radical cultural philosophy to one of the most influential literary magazines in the world. She wrote that at the time she started her career,

literary intellectuals had two major preoccupations—defending high art against mass art, which, in Dwight Macdonald's inimitable formulation, was considered not art at all but merely a commodity like chewing gum; and rescuing civilization from, as they saw it, the barbarians and antinomian nihilists of the radical counterculture. Those few who tried to relate to, say, pop music, did painful things like analyzing Beatles songs to show how much like high art they were...But Susan Sontag presented me with another possibility, which I must have taken in, though I don't remember consciously doing so: that one could write in her tone of high seriousness, and draw on high-cultural references, and still engage with contemporary pop culture and cultural radicalism on their own terms.68

67 Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; Letter to Editor, April 21, 1969, MC 646. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

68 Ellen Willis, "Three Elegies for Susan Sontag," New Politics. 10, no. 3 (2005): 118. Willis was ultimately successful at joining the ranks of her heroes to the extent that a 1971 article in the New York Times said, “Like any art, popular or not, rock music needs critics, not publicists; but none are in the offing. Unlike the
She defined herself in opposition to the older generation of intellectuals who she felt had ossified the field of cultural criticism, but she did not want to leave it to them. She wanted to what they did, but she wanted to do it her own way, challenging conventions and prejudices.

In 1969, Willis appeared on the panel of a talk show called *Critique* with other cultural critics, including Richard Goldstein and classical music critic Alan Rich, who wrote for *New York* magazine. After, Rich wrote in *New York* of a debate that occurred on the show between himself, Goldstein, and Willis, sparking an exchange with Willis in print in which she elucidated her critical and aesthetic theories of rock.

Rich recounted that when the panel discussed a new rock and roll orchestral piece, he panned the rock-classical hybrid. He explained to his readers, “My long tirade had to do mostly with finding the piece a collage of bad imitations, fake Bach, very second-hand rock, artistically indefensible combinations of the two.”69 He wrote that Goldstein and Willis, who “shared the degree, if not the basis for my wrath, proceeded to jump all over me. How dare I, they said in effect, bring music-movies, rock even lacks genuine reviewers: with the sole exception of Ellen Willis of the New Yorker (who writes infrequently) rock has no Pauline Kael or Andrew Sarris to love it and loathe it, praise and damn, laugh and cry, and confront their feelings with its nuances. (R. L., “Making the rock pop scene,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1971.)

critic standards to bear on their sacred precinct? Why don’t we over-30 type go away and leave the kids…to love or hate their own way?  

In her response to Rich, printed the next week in the *New York* Letters to the Editor, Willis’ lays out her view of rock aesthetics and how her critical approach differed from what she viewed as the critical establishment. She writes,

I’d like to reassure Alan Rich that I defend to the death his right to listen to rock in any way he pleases. And I’m not against ‘standards’ or even ‘analysis.’ What Rich can’t seem to grasp is that neither of these worthy things is synonymous with academic ontological criticism. To accurately describe and judge rock music for what it is, rather than for how it resembles other forms of expression, a different vocabulary is required. There is nothing ‘cabalistic’ about this vocabulary. It can easily be explained to anyone who isn’t so fixated on traditional critical categories that he can’t see them for what they are—namely, artificial categories more useful in some situations than in others. When applied to rock, these categories actually hinder understanding. An example is Rich’s equation of my protectiveness toward rock with distaste for the ‘commercial establishment.’ The commercial establishment created rock in the first place by exploiting poor black singers. Those crass beginnings are an integral part of what rock was and is: it is the intellectual and culture establishments that subvert rock by trying to redeem it as Art. Just for the record, I am not, nor do I pass myself off as a ‘kid.’ I am 27. Furthermore, to respond to Rich’s bold insinuation that the *New Yorker* is not exactly an underground youth mag, I have absolutely no objection to older people reading my column. But when I hear anyone talk of ‘artistic validity,’ I reach for my water pistol.”

Her problem wasn’t with Rich’s assessment; it was with his approach. She believed that a new idiom was being approached on antiquated terms. The argument that serious music was on the same level of high art “tries to show that pop music meets standards of excellence set by its detractors,” writes Timothy Grayck, and this was

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.
the root of Willis’ problem with such an approach. Critics were subjecting rock music to critical standards that were ill-suited to the genre, and in some cases were antithetical to the aims of rock culture. Willis explained in later years, “We were literary; it wasn’t like we were rejecting high culture. We just saw that the way we experienced rock ’n’ roll was not the same as the way we experienced Beethoven or whatever.” Her concern was to push forward the form of music criticism, to propel it to keep it in step with the progress in politics and society, as well as the aesthetic developments that were continually altering the genre. To do so, new modes of thought needed to be created to address a new idiom, rather than shoehorning rock into old modes of musical appreciation. It was only in this way that critics effectively explain the music and its aesthetic, cultural, political, and social importance.

In her efforts to affect the changes she believed criticism needed, preaching to the choir wasn’t Willis’ style. She would rather bring her message to the mainstream, while remaining faithful to her beliefs. Certainly, her audience at the New Yorker was suspicious of rock music, as is apparent from the deliberateness of Willis’ attempts to rehabilitate the genre’s image for her audience. She explained to


73 Ibid.
them that rock had evolved into an art form, resulting in the emergence of “the first self-conscious rock fans.”⁷⁴ She related the developments that led to this change:

When American bohemians took up rock, they brought along distinctions between art and Mammon, and for the first time people talked about ‘serious,’ as opposed to merely commercial, rock. And though there is some serious overlap, the split between the AM-radio-singles-teenie market and the FM-L.P.-student-hippie-intellectual audience is a fact of life. With this evolution has come a shift in the way the music is perceived. There is, for example, an unprecedented demand for technical virtuosity. Good musicianship was once as irrelevant to rock as it was rare...But now the music has enough scope to attract excellent instrumentalists, as well as an audience interested in traditional criteria of quality.⁷⁵

One thing that is clear is that her imagined audience is a dubious one, outside of the culture and unaware of the shifts within it that Willis credits with elevating the form. She speaks in terms that would be relatable to a reader who was concerned with issues of cultural legitimacy, addressing precisely the type of questions aspirational upper-middlebrow readers would find pertinent. By reassuring them that it met the criteria of “serious art,” she encouraged readers to reconsider the form.

Part of convincing people to develop an appreciation of rock not only meant convincing readers of its cultural importance, but also addressing its aesthetic qualities. Critics had previously generalized the music, as she noted in a notebook in which she paraphrased an anti-rock critic’s argument. She wrote, “Rock and roll consists of raucous noise and a monotonous beat and lacks melody or anything

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⁷⁴ Ellen Willis, Rock etc., *New Yorker*, July 6, 1968, 56.

⁷⁵ Ibid.
remotely musical. “76 Her response was to highlight the aesthetic nuance in rock and roll, writing,

There are far too many different kinds of R&R to justify a statement like this (which is my rough approximation of the blanket condemnation often made by enraged critics.) First of all, to make one broad distinction, there is slow rock and roll and fast rock and roll. Then, besides the ‘screaming’ type of rock and roll (exemplified by suck ‘singers’ as Little Richard), which admittedly is hard on the ear and probably is what the critics have in mind, we have rock and roll ballads, rhythm-and-blues rock and roll, country and western rock and roll and “jump’ rock and roll, just to name a few categories.” 77

Her habit of anthologizing and mapping out rock’s historical roots and the differences and changes within the genre may have been in response to such minimizing criticisms, a way to counter such views by showing the complexity of rock.

In addition to bringing new ways to think about rock and roll to her audience, Willis styled her writing on the New Journalism, like many rock critics of her generation.

writers of my generation who were cultural and sexual radicals and had passionate mass-cultural loyalties—to movies and even more to rock and roll—regarded literary intellectuals as uncomprehending dinosaurs; our models were journalists like Pauline Kael and Tom Wolfe… the advent of the “new journalism” convinced me that writing for popular magazines could be more than a lark, that it had potent aesthetic and intellectual rewards; and this path also appealed to my interest in mass cultural forms.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.
The influence of the New Journalism is apparent throughout her rock criticism, from her subjective perspective to how she draws the reader into the feeling of a scene or experience, rather than simply narrating it.

A 1972 review of a Van Morrison concert is an excellent example of her skill at capturing and conveying a scene, as well as her personal approach to criticism. She writes,

Van Morrison comes onstage wearing sunglasses. A girl two rows in front of me is wearing a green glass heart with a silver arrow through it. She stands up and screams like a siren, her voice rising and falling. Morrison is poker-faced and poker-legged, not simply cool but downright cold. After the first few songs, he begins playing games—burlesquing sexiness, exaggerating his usual vocal idiosyncrasies and supplementing them with what I can only attempt to describe as hard-edge scatting. (A parody? A technical exercise?) He hold his body aloof, kicking one leg from the knee…I’m as big a Moondance freak as the next Moondance freak and I even like Tupelo Honey…but I find Morrison’s stage persona hard to take. His effectiveness for me has always depended on the way the emotional impact of his songs—which often revolve around little epiphanies about the wonder of simple things and the recovery, or rediscovery, of innocence—balances his controlled, stylized white soul singing. His performing stance upsets the balance by emphasizing everything that is mannered and artificial about his singing while making the content of many of the songs either absurd or unintelligible. All in all, I’d rather sit home with his albums.78

Willis transports the reader to the event with her, not only effectively describing what she is seeing but also what she is feeling. A sense of who she is, what she likes, and why she likes it comes through clearly in only a few lines, and it is up to the reader to decide whether they value the same things that Willis values in a performance. For Willis, it would be disingenuous to pretend that she doesn’t have

personal feelings about Morrison, and it would get in the way of honestly conveying the truth of her experience to the reader. Her analysis of the emotional impact of his songs is insightful, and the review is completely effective as criticism without any pretensions to neutrality.

In another article that highlighted her New Journalism style, this time a 1969 article about Elvis Presley in Las Vegas, she wrote,

I was faced with a dilemma familiar to observers of revolutions and nuclear particles. To participate would compromise my objectivity; to hold aloof would falsify the experience. In a medium as sensitive to context as rock, the hype is an essential part of the message. The story was not just Elvis but Elvis and all of us in Kerkorian’s womb. I flashed yes, and, along with other refugees from the cultural revolution, armed with long hair, giant sunglasses, and artificial euphoriants, I set out to dig Babylon: Garish is beautiful.79

By describing her “dilemma” between objectivity and subjectivity, then coming down on the side of subjectivity, she was declaring herself a member of the New Journalism school and demonstrating that it was a considered choice. Each of Willis’ major literary models are represented in this paragraph. With “Garish is beautiful,” Willis is embracing Sontag’s love of the camp. Inserting herself into the narrative as part of the story echoes the autobiographical tendencies of both Kael and Wolfe, as does her rejection of objectivity. Moreover, she is self-consciously performing subjectivity in the piece, adding a layer of self-awareness to her use of the technique.

Her challenges to convention went beyond her style. Young people were turning to rock and roll as their preferred form of expression, and ignoring factors like politics and cultural changes meant misunderstanding the music and how it was working in peoples’ lives. Addressing such issues in the context of musical criticism was subversive and a radical challenge to popular cultural norms. Paul Friedlander writes, “One crucial way in which the institutions of popular music try to maintain their dominance is through ignoring musics which contain elements of alien discourses (e.g. politics, obscenity, explicit sexuality), for if those elements are brought into popular music, they may have a disruptive effect.”80 This disruptive effect was precisely what new critics like Ellen Willis wanted, in order to replace old frozen notions of cultural value in pop music with new ones that were more reflective of and responsive to what was happening among its consumers.

Her radical goals were more than cultural; they were highly political. As with many of her generation, Willis did not believe it was necessary to separate her politics from her work. On the contrary, she believed that it was her duty to use her platform to both represent her radical views but also to hold the left accountable. As a public intellectual, her critiques of the counterculture pointed out the ways that it was failing to live up to their, and her, radical ideals. Willis was a pragmatist, and pressed for practical action and change.

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80 Friedlander, 2.
Willis considered herself a part of the counterculture and dedicated a large part of her life to writing about it, but unlike other of her generation, including Goldstein, she never saw it as the answer to the real problems America faced. She used the metaphor of a maze to describe its role,

> It is as if we are all trapped in a maze; some of us who have gotten bored or horrified with the official route through the maze have found all sorts of creative ways to cut corners and wade through back alleys, but we are now ending up in pretty much the same places. It’s the maze itself that needs to be opened up, rearranged, or simply destroyed.\(^81\) To her, the ultimate question was, “Is there an underground exit to the maze?”\(^82\) Her answer that there was not, that the whole system symbolized by the maze needed to be remade for any real change to be possible.

Her dedication to the counterculture came through even as she challenged its weak points, as in 1967 review of the Newport Music festival. The title of the article, “You Can’t Go Down Home Again” is a tongue-in-cheek lament over the changing rock scene. She describes the tensions at the festival at a time when the state of popular music was in flux. Willis sees both a dissolution of the rock scene and its continuing vibrancy. The music was continually changing, with styles coming together with others breaking apart. The same could be said of the members of the counterculture that attended the festival.

Though the event had a long history, it exploded in numbers and exposure within a few years due to the folk revival and the advent of folk-rock. For much of

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81 Willis, *Beginning*, 53.

82 Ibid.
the article, as with her other work, Willis laid out the many strands of the counterculture represented at the festival. Her interest in mapping out the counterculture was a constant; one of her archival materials is a model of the strands of cultural influence that ended in the creation of rock and roll. It appears she was determined to disprove the argument that rock and roll had no canon by organizing its influences explicitly. Newport was the perfect subject for her to untangle these influences on the genre. Its lineup featured a mixture of R&B, blues, folk, and rock. The audience reflected the diversity of the musical acts. From the outside, however, the audience appeared to be an undifferentiated group of countercultural youth, and part of Willis’ work was to explain the strained relationships between the festival’s attendees.

Willis wrote that Newport “failed as a festival. Instead of camaraderie, there was tension; instead of participation, consumership.”83 For Willis, the festival was a site of cultural conflict, not simply a concert. Whereas these events were once “exercises in community,” now fans “had apparently come not as true believers but as business-like consumers, determined to get their money’s worth.”84 Her report earned her the wrath of the event’s organizer in letter from, but she stood her ground in response. The ties between the counterculture and its quasi-Marxist consumer revolt made it difficult to understand what expectations and obligations still existed

83 Ibid, 28.
84 Ibid, 29.
between the industry and the audience. It also made focusing on this aspect of the complicated market forces a touchy subject.

Consumerism continued to preoccupy her throughout the Sixties. Her glowing review of Elvis’ new Las Vegas residency opened with the lines, “Las Vegas is more like Hollywood than Hollywood, because money is changing hands right up front. Committed to veneer as an art form, over-thirty and relentlessly white in essence, if not always packaging, Vegas is the antithesis of the cultural revolution.”\(^85\) Willis defines the cultural revolution here in negative terms—it was not “over thirty” or “relentlessly white,” but it was also less disconnected from market forces than it appeared to be. The appearance of being outside of the market was the important thing. She wrote, “The crass determination to get rich has been one of the great unsung forces behind the cultural revolution.”\(^86\) Rather than disparaging the commercial side of the industry, she simply acknowledges it.

For others, the main goal in writing about rock and roll was defending and championing the music and the counterculture. As Willis’ criticism and career showed, she was more interested in, honestly assessing the problems with the music and its culture and grappling with them. Rather than trying to understand how the music fit with her ideology, she assessed it in realistic terms. Her contributions to the left as a cultural critic was invaluable, largely because of the role she played as a

\(^{85}\) Ibid, 41.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.
public intellectual in her writing. In expressing her doubts or worries about the
direction of the movement, she was not deriding it, but rather trying to affect its
course.

For her as for many others, the direction the movement took in the late 1960s
meant a serious reassessment of her political commitments. In fact, it signaled her
decision to shift her focus increasingly away from rock music to her growing interest
in radical feminism. For a time in the mid-Sixties, the two interests converged. But
by the end of the Sixties and into the Seventies, her activism became a larger part of
her life, particularly her involvement with the feminist movement. She continued to
write cultural criticism, with her expanding political perspective becoming
increasingly apparent therein. Her personal experiences changed her perspective on
the music and the entire culture it represented.

In 1968, her attendance at the Chicago Democratic National Committee
Convention had the same galvanizing effect on her that it had on so many of her
peers. In an autobiographical sketch entitled, “Up from Radicalism: A Feminist
Journal,” she later described the experience:

August: Chicago, screwing the Democrats. Under siege, my political
confusion disappears. But when the battle’s over I get depressed about the
we-are-making-the-revolution-now machismo-mongering and we-are-the-
people bullshit. We’ve yet to become the people. Am I the people? Are the
Yippies me? I don’t know.87

87 Willis, “Up from Radicalism,” 5.
She wrote that though she identified with the left, “No organization ever seemed to be doing what I wanted to do, whatever that was.” She felt “disenchanted with quasi-religious utopianism,” encountering sexism and parochialism. Her suspicious attitude towards radicals battled with her internal dive toward radicalism. She recognized that there was a serious sexism problem even amongst far-left activists. While she was hardly the only one to recognize this fact, it affected her tremendously. She wrote, “what we need is an analysis that can connect the politics of nations with the politics of our own bodies.”

In September of 1968, a friend in California introduced her to *Notes from the First Year*, a feminist journal first published in New York City a few months earlier. Penned by Shulamith Firestone, it was titled, “The Women’s Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View.” It offered a new conception of feminism, one that challenged prejudices toward the feminist movement. Some of these prejudices were shared by Willis. Willis felt the need to advocate for women, but she resisted fully committing herself the feminist movement for reasons that were, at least partially, down to her preconceptions of what a radical women’s group would be like. When writing, for example, about the group’s landmark protests against the Ms. America Pageant in 1968, Willis admitted, “I’m dubious—won’t people think they’re just

88 Ibid, 4.

89 Ibid, 4.

90 Ibid, 5.
ugly jealous women?"91 Though her attitude would change drastically in relatively short time, she initially displayed common biases against the movement. 

*Notes* preempted such diversions from their core message, opening with the question,

What does the word 'feminism' bring to mind? A granite faced spinster obsessed with a vote? Or a George Sand in cigar and bloomers, a woman against nature? Chances are that whatever image you have, it is a negative one. To be called a feminist has become an insult, so much so that a young woman intellectual, often radical in every other area, will deny vehemently that she is a feminist.

Shulamith Firestone lamented such superficial resistance to feminism, but she clearly understood that even potential supporters of her cause would wrangle with it. To explain the real issues at stake, she outlined the history of feminism, describing what we would now term “first-wave feminism.” In *Notes*, she compared the women’s struggle with that of African-Americans, connecting their repression to women’s oppression by saying it originated in the same forces of capitalism, prejudice, political marginalization, and traditional culture as racism.

She noted that many women had been involved in the fight against racial discrimination, all the while facing gender inequality, thereby they had been subsuming their own needs to those of the civil rights movement. This resonated with Willis, who saw the same problem. Firestone called for a new, radical form of feminism that prioritized the needs of women, writing, “Put your own interests first,

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91 Willis, “Up from Radicalism,” 4.
then proceed to make alliances with other oppressed groups. Demand a piece of that revolutionary pie before you put your life on the line.”

Willis was moved by these essays, and despite her misgivings about radical organizations, she resolved “to join the New York group when I get home. Notes scares me, but by now I recognize that I’m resisting.” Her involvement in the group quickly accelerated and she soon became an active member. Then, just as she became increasingly involved, the group that published Notes, New York Radical Women, disbanded. In 1969, Willis and Firestone formed a new women’s rights group called the Redstockings, a radical feminist organization with a Marxist ideology. The Redstockings based their name on an 18th century social organization, The Blue Stockings, a club that was revolutionary in emphasizing the intellectual development of its female members. The Redstockings repurposed the phrase, adding “red” to it to reflect their far-left views.

The Redstockings Manifesto outlined their goals, as well as the features that distinguished them from other women’s groups. They argued that men oppressed women and a radical solution was necessary. The document declared,

[Every] relationship is a class relationship, and the conflicts between individual men and women are political conflicts that can only be solved collectively.

Our chief task at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising is not "therapy," which implies the

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.
existence of individual solutions and falsely assumes that the male-female relationship is purely personal, but the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives.

The first requirement for raising class consciousness is honesty, in private and in public, with ourselves and other women.  

Willis’ recollections of this time show that the views she and Firestone expressed in the Manifesto were very personal to her:

my own belief in the power of ideas stems from my most intense period of political activism, which was in the feminist movement, in the early women’s liberation movement. A lot of what we did was to formulate and make public an analysis of the politics of male-female relations…by articulating our vision, and then applying it to specific issues and aspects of politics and culture, we went from being a small radical cabal to creating a mass movement that along with the labor movement and the civil rights movement has been one of the most influential social movements of modern times, both in this country and world-wide. So of all the lessons I’ve learned from feminism, the importance of an intellectual framework is one of the most vital.

For Ellen Willis, consciousness-raising meant ramping up her commitment to inserting women’s voices and issues into conversations about rock. She had opened the profession to women, and now she would imbue it with an increasingly radical feminist viewpoint.

She became a vocal proponent of amplifying women’s voices in the media in all areas, especially those that were traditionally dominated by men. She was on a panel at a National Organization of Women conference in 1973 with other female writers, including other high-profile journalists like Esquire’s Nora Ephron and The

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Voice’s Ellen Frankfort. The discussion was about the unique set of problems faced by women journalists. According to an account of the meeting,

The problem cited most frequently by the panelists was the often conflicting relationship between the "truth" and one's feminist politics. Ellen Willis of the New Yorker magazine said that some feminists expect to find ideology in all her writing and can't understand why she wants to write criticism of rock music. "To them, she said, "once you've said rock music is sexist, you've said everything there is to say about it.”

For Willis, her belief in women’s equality was inseparable from her job, her relationships, or any other aspect of her life. Whereas other feminists might have thought that uncovering the sexism rampant in rock music was the end of the story—evidence that it was just another irretrievable bastion of male dominance—Willis sought to make a place for women in the field and to champion the women who were breaking onto the scene.

She felt that the counterculture was hypocritical in its approach to women and gender equality, and that it was part of her job to point out its failure to live up to its ideals. In a 1969 review, she wrote,

One of the major flaws of the counterculture is that for all its concern with the dispossessed, it is as oppressive as the surrounding society toward the female half of the race. It treats women as “chicks”—nubile decorations—or mothers or goddesses or bitches, rarely as human beings. Some heroes of the cultural revolution…equate rebellion with assertion of their maleness, become obnoxiously aggressive, arrogant and violent, and espouse a version of utopia in which women are reduced to faceless instruments of their sexual fantasies. Others, more cleverly, consider themselves “liberated” from the strictures of the traditional male role—the obligation to support women financially and protect them physically, to be strong, competitive, and ambitious, to suppress their emotions and their personal vanity—and imitate
women in the manner of whites imitating blacks, while nonetheless insisting that women serve them and defer to them.  

Representation of women in culture mattered to Willis, and the fact that such apparently politically aware people as made up the counterculture, including radicals and activists, continued to treat women as subservient objects made her question their commitments to real change.  

Willis was committed to equality for women, and part of that meant challenging the shortcomings coming from within her own subculture. Similar themes came through in 1969’s “Up from Radicalism,” where she wrote about communalism and a visit by LSD advocate Richard Alpert, who along with Timothy Leary had established a large estate in Millbrook, New York whose residents participated in psychedelic experiments. She said,

He talks about how the drug dissolves people’s ego hangups and helps them live cooperatively, and it’s really convincing until he explains how the women at Millbrook are earth-goddesses. He doesn’t say who does the community’s shitwork, but I have my suspicions.

Even in the most countercultural communities, there was a gap between ideals of equality and progress and its reality. This soured Willis on the entire enterprise, and she writes about “becoming disenchanted with quasi-religious utopianism. The hippies aren’t making much headway. Sexual freedom, the end of ego games and communal cooperation can’t be willed into existence. Psychic liberation is difficult,

95 Willis, Beginning, 57.

maybe impossible, even for the dedicated.”97 This mirrored her overall assessment of the counterculture’s rebellion as somewhat superficial. As she wrote in 1977, “The pop stance was honest up to a point. But its commitment to making the most of the existing reality excluded painful or dangerous questions about systemic change.”98 Willis saw it as her job to lay bare these hypocrisies, as well as address them with her own feminist writing about women in rock music.

The best example of her feminist criticism is an article that posthumously examines Janis Joplin’s career. In this 1976 piece, it is evident that Willis values Joplin both as a musician and as a cultural symbol. More than a token female figure, Joplin was a “musical idol” who helped define rock’s heyday in the late Sixties. She was the first female rocker to transcend the gender barrier; to be appreciated as someone on par with her male counterparts. As any man’s equal in her profession, she was also a symbol of female empowerment.

Willis reflected that Joplin was “the only Sixties culture figure to make visible and public women’s experience of the quest for individual liberation, which was very different from men’s…Underneath lurked—just barely—a feminist (or prefeminist) paradox.” In the 1960s, women’s liberation often equated to sexual liberation, which effectively reduced many women’s autonomy to their sexual expression. Joplin’s “favorite metaphors,” wrote Willis, “were singing as fucking (a

97 Willis, Essential, 10
98 Willis, Beginning, 81.
first principle of rock-and-roll) and fucking as liberation (a first principle of the cultural revolution).”

Though these were not exclusively feministic views, Joplin used them in her quest for personal fulfillment. Many women of the era struggled with this sexualized version of liberation; as Willis’ own writings show, discomfort with this paradigm did not mean that women (even brilliant, liberated women) had a clear idea of how to overcome its limitations. Willis herself had faced a similar struggle. Writing again in the 1980s about Joplin, sexuality, and feminism, Willis reminded her readers,

[I]n these skittish days it bears repeating that the context of sexual utopianism was, in the first place, the near-universal revolt of young people against what are now nostalgically referred to as “traditional values”: That is, women’s chastity policed by the dubious promise of male ”respect” and lifetime monogamy; by the withholding of birth control and the criminalizing of abortion; by the threat of social ostracism, sexual violence and exploitation, forced marriage and motherhood.

For fledgling feminists, breaking out of these traditional norms sometimes meant hypersexualization, which was an about-face from expected female behavior. However, it was a problematic view of femininity, reducing women to “sexual objects” and “breeders,” even within purportedly radical communities.

Joplin helped make a space for empowered female voices in a predominantly male field. Pop historian Diane Railton reminds readers “that the inherent masculinity of the bourgeois public sphere was mirrored by the masculinity of rock

99 Ibid.

culture.” Willis recognized this central fact, and understood that discussing it provided an opportunity to point out both the progress women in rock were making as well as how far they still had to go. She assessed Joplin from a more gender-conscious point of view than her colleagues and many fans.

Men in rock and roll, according to Willis, “tend to identify with their maskmaking, to see it as creative and—more or less—to control it.” Within the capitalist patriarchy, men had to fit into social roles, but had more freedom in their work and personal lives. For women, “the relation of public personality to private self—something every popular artist has to work out—is especially problematic.”

Unlike men, wrote Willis, “women need images simply to survive. A woman is usually aware, on some level, that men do not allow her to be her ‘real self,’ and worse, that the acceptable masks represent men’s’ fantasies, not her own.” She believed that “the female celebrity is confronted with this dilemma in its starkest form,” facing the added burden of femininity.

If finding reality in the male rock world was challenging, given the “masks” stars were required to wear as public figures, it was doubly hard to see past the walls

102 Willis, Beginning, 61.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
female artists erected around themselves. The walls were part image projection and part protective screens, but to Willis they were also manifestations of the culture that produced a figure like Joplin. Joplin was constantly struggling to control over her image. Her power to do so restricted but she managed, as many women did, to find space to express herself nonetheless.

Sexualization was the flip side of Joplin’s empowerment; it was also a key factor in her gaining control of the crowd. For Willis, who championed pleasure and fought sexual repression, the audience’s response to Joplin’s performances was cause for discomfort:

Watching men groove on Janis, I began to appreciate the resentment many black people feel toward whites who are blues freaks. Janis sung out of her pain as a woman, and men dug it. Yet it was men who caused the pain, and if they stopped causing it, they would not have her to dig. In a way, their adulation was the cruelest insult of all. Janis’ response—to sing harder, get higher, be worshipped more—was rebellious, acquiescent, and bewildered all at once. When she said, “Onstage I make love to 25,000 people, then I go home alone,” she wasn’t just repeating the cliché of the sad clown or the poor little rich girl. She was noting that the more she gave, the less she got, and that honey, it ain’t fair.107

In her beautiful style, Willis uses Joplin as an embodiment of a common feeling of the time (one Willis felt herself): women knew they wanted and deserve more, but were unsure how to go about getting it. The status quo wasn’t fair but a good alternative was hard to find, for Joplin as well as Willis. Women in the rock world had to work twice as hard to get the respect their male counterparts had, and ignoring

107 Ibid.
their gender when they were successful shortchanged the scope of their accomplishments.

Joplin gave herself over to her audience when she was onstage, just as many male artists did. However, for her it was more complicated in that she made herself vulnerable to men, and within the oppressive gender dynamic of rock culture and American culture, created an entirely other level of vulnerability was inserted into a form that already valued expression. This was an essential element to understanding Joplin’s music and her role in pop, and one that male critics often tended to overlook. For Willis, it was excruciating and unmistakable, and certainly a corollary to how she herself felt as a token woman in a man’s field.

Joplin’s public struggle personally affected Willis’ development as a feminist. For example, she became convinced upon seeing Janis’ wild mane to finally stop straightening her own curly hair. Though this may seem like an insignificant change, Willis saw “a direct line from that sort of response to the apocryphal burned bras and all that followed. Direct, but not simple.”\(^\text{108}\) Just as black cultural nationalism encouraged many African Americans to stop straightening their hair as a symbol of empowerment, the small shift in consciousness prompted by Joplin’s expression of personal freedom was a manifestation of a deeper desire for liberation. The simple act of ceasing to straighten one’s hair was meaningful, as

\(^\text{108}\) Ibid.
small expressions of autonomy like these are what inspire larger transformations in society.

Willis’ quest for female liberation went much deeper than the external. If finding reality in the male rock world was challenging, given the “masks” stars were required to wear as public figures, it was doubly hard to see past the walls female artists erected around themselves. The walls were part image projection and part protective screens, but to Willis they were also manifestations of the culture that produced a figure like Joplin. Joplin was constantly struggling to control over her image. Her power to do so restricted but she managed, as many women did, to find space to express herself nonetheless. In expanding upon Joplin’s role in the rock scene, Willis amplified its empowering effect.

Though she had been building up to her role as a feminist critic her whole career, her exposure to the nascent radical movement meant her interests in culture and politics converged into acute focus. She was writing about rock and roll and addressing its role in society, but she had only an inchoate understanding of her own ideology. Though it took time to refine her ideas, when she became a feminist activist that her voice became stronger than ever. By the mid-1970s, she was offering criticism of her profession that was heavily focused on its sexism.

Reviewing Greil Marcus’ *Mystery Train*, she wrote,

My major reservation about “Mystery Train” is that it virtually ignores women, and thus perpetuates and elaborates a set of myths about America that are only half true. It’s not just that Marcus doesn’t write about female performers—thereby overlooking crucial themes—but that, except in some remark on black machismo and a brief account of a conversation with Dominique Robertson (Robbie’s wife), he does not deal with the relation of
the male myths to a female perception of reality which remains largely
unread, unsung, unacceptable, and even unconscious... It is easy, and
probably accurate, to say that only a woman could correct this sort of bias.
But that lets Marcus off the hook—and perhaps underestimates him. Greil
Marcus owes it to his own vision of America to try and cross this most
dangerous divide of all.109

Willis’ goal was not just to add a woman’s voice to the rock critic scene, but to push
her colleagues to push themselves to amplify them as well. It wasn’t just a woman’s
job to write about women rockers, but everyone’s responsibility. An accurate
understanding of the era was impossible without such a perspective.

During the decades to follow, Willis’ role as a feminist and public
intellectual became her primary focus. Her writing about rock and roll tapered off
over the seventies, with her last “Rock, Etc.” article appearing in the New Yorker in
1978. Though she didn’t write about rock as long or as frequently as her cohorts,
only publishing fifty-six editions of her column between 1968-1975, she helped to
create the intellectual tone for rock music and high standards for its criticism. She
proved that a woman could enter the “boy’s club” of rock criticism and out-think and
out-write her male peers. She was one of the best pop critics of all time; some say
she was the best, full stop.110 And while her gender had nothing to do with her
abilities, it made a major impact on how and why she wrote.

109 Ellen Willis, Review of Mystery Train by Greil Marcus, New Yorker,
(September 15, 1975): 118.

110 Christgau, interview by author.
Though Richard Goldstein preceded Willis as a rock critic, her influence on him was enormous. After her death, he was called upon to sum up her legacy. He wrote,

Ellen didn’t have any signature of being a woman writer, but certainly her way of looking at the music was different… she added to this a kind of rigor which didn’t necessarily come from a vulnerability to the rock mystique that a number of male critics had. Her opinions weren’t formed by analysis covering up an identification with the musicians. I don’t mean to say her gender was the reason why, because her mind was more rigorous than almost anyone’s I knew.\textsuperscript{111}

It was as though she tried to work out the enormous social, political, and especially cultural changes and what they meant for herself throughout her career.

For her, a large part of that work was challenging preconceptions about musical hierarchy and the importance of pop music. She preempted arguments about the form’s lack of substance by mapping rock’s canon extensively, pinpointing important developments that gave rock its artistic backbone. She wrote histories of rock’s formation, using specific examples of music to support her arguments. Her goal was not to convince her audience that rock deserved appreciation based on traditional modes of understanding artistry, but to create a new approach to a new kind of music.

For a long time, Willis brought this talent of innovating new modes of understanding--along with her passion for activism and acute critical mind--to the study of rock music. She brought this same talent to her feminist writings as well as

her career progressed, and when rock music stopped moving her, she moved into exclusively writing about politics and largely left her work as a rock critic behind her. Though she would be remembered by many as a feminist firebrand and astute political commentator by those who were never acquainted with her rock writing, the work she did in both areas were connected by her lifelong passion for equality, and using cultural criticism to push forward the opportunities of those marginalized by a dominant culture.

From Goldstein’s idealism to Willis’ radicalism, a major focus of early rock criticism had to do with the connections between the form and the subculture it was a part of. But, over time, rock’s ties to the subculture became increasingly tenuous. In particular, the commitments of rock performers and fans to leftist ideals proved to be lacking. Radical culture did not result in radical political change, and the disillusionment it caused both the true believer, Goldstein, and the natural skeptic, Ellen Willis, to rethink their commitments to rock. When the choice came down to activism versus music criticism, they both chose activism.

Part of the reason for their disillusionment had to do with the political failures of the Sixties left. But a significant part of it also had to do with changes within rock itself. When rock criticism was new, it had a mission: to convince the public to take the form seriously, and thus to take its message seriously. Rock critics were successful at this, but the music failed to live up to its political promises. Rock became more accepted and popular than ever, but the social changes it promoted never materialized.
One major contributing factor in the neutering of rock’s revolutionary potential was its success as a mainstream form. Over the course of the late Sixties and early Seventies, rock and roll became the most lucrative cultural product in the nation. This is partly due to the role played by *Rolling Stone* magazine in moving rock music to the mainstream. The magazine brought the rock culture along with it, but left its political and social content behind. With millions at stake, rock’s political content became significantly less radical. This would change the way rock worked in its fans lives as well as the way critics wrote about it.
Chapter Five: *Rolling Stone*

When *Rolling Stone* debuted, it was onto a scene that had not yet produced a successful mainstream magazine about rock music. Within five years, *Rolling Stone* had not only broken into the market, but come to dominate mainstream discussions of rock and roll. How did *Rolling Stone* achieve such success in such a short time, and what did their dominance of the field mean to the genre moving forward? The magazine affected conceptions of rock music in their own time and through to the present. Accounting for their influence and understanding what they valued is important to understanding their role in defining the musical culture of the Sixties.

One of the major reasons *Rolling Stone* captured national attention was their ability to tap into a market that was notoriously anti-capitalistic, in ideology if not spending habits. They did so by positioning themselves as a part of the counterculture, an alternative to the corporate media, and true believers in the music, rather than interlopers coming in to exploit it. It was not long, however, before the line between hippie capitalism and outright capitalism blurred, and the magazine became one of the most powerful businesses to emerge from the Sixties rock scene.

In the process, the magazine’s commitments came into question. Did they serve their audience or their industry advertisers? Was their interest in speaking honestly to rock and roll fans or to increase their market shares? These questions were debated in real time among rock critics, and are still debated by historians. Because the magazine was so influential in projecting its musical tastes forward into
the present, the motivations behind the music they chose to champion are important to understand.

Another major factor in the musical tastes *Rolling Stone* featured were the personal tastes of its founder, Jann Wenner. He exerted a strong influence at the helm of the magazine over the content and the way certain artists were treated in its pages. Examining his role at the magazine over the years and his personal motivations sheds light on *Rolling Stone*’s editorial choices. Whether Wenner’s personal input amounted to overreach or not is a matter of what promises the magazine made to its audience, as is the question is whether his influence interfered with the magazine’s integrity. In answering these questions, it is necessary to assess what obligations *Rolling Stone* had to its readers, and how those were connected to the countercultural context the magazine emerged from.

*Rolling Stone* magazine was founded in 1967 by Jann Wenner with the help of Ralph Gleason, one a young hippie and the other an esteemed jazz critic. The duo, led by Wenner, tapped into the cultural moment in a way that proved more influential than anyone could have anticipated. Beginning as an alternative magazine that espoused the virtues of hippie culture, *Rolling Stone* quickly became a juggernaut, banking millions of dollars, becoming an enormous influence on mainstream culture and, eventually, politics, and making rock criticism a permanent part of American life. The success of *Rolling Stone* also changed the nature of rock criticism in many ways, not all of which were positive.
Not long after its founding in 1967, it became apparent that by tapping into the cultural zeitgeist, *Rolling Stone* had also tapped into a massive source of wealth. The counterculture, while claiming to be anti-capitalistic, was willing to spend an enormous amount of money on rock and roll and its trappings. Major publishers like Hearst tried to capture this market with magazines like *Cheetah* and *Eye*, attempts that ultimately failed. The mainstream industry made efforts to court the young hip demographic, but in the end, it was a magazine with its origins in the “underground” that managed to accomplish the feat.

Success had a transformative effect on *Rolling Stone*. When the magazine started, its slogan was “just a little rock and roll paper from San Francisco.” By 1974, was redubbed a “biweekly general interest magazine covering contemporary American culture, politics, and arts, with a special interest in music” \(^1\) and in 1975, Jann Wenner told reporters that he no longer considered it an underground magazine.\(^2\) Meanwhile, Wenner was labeled a “wunderkind” as *Rolling Stone* rose to dominate a new, hugely lucrative field.

Wenner came into the profession as a young man from within the Northern California hippie scene, and his initial stance at the magazine would reflect that. In 1963, Wenner attended the University of California at Berkeley. He was there for the tail end of the same tumultuous period that affected Ellen Willis so deeply, the days

\(^1\) Mazullo, 149.

of the Free Speech Movement. When the Free Speech Movement began in 1964, Wenner had barely begun his first semester at Cal. However, he immediately inserted himself into the middle of the action, though he never actually fully committed himself to the cause.

He was drawn to crowds that consisted mainly of radicals, but never quite left behind the wealthy, high society state of mind he was raised in. A friend from college said, “Here was this dope-smoking liberal on the one hand, and on the other hand, there he’d be, with this glint in his eye—starstruck I guess you’d say, begging for invitations to deb parties. I thought it was hypocritical.” According biographer Robert Draper, a college roommate remembered of Wenner, “I never met anyone who was motivated exclusively and purely by opportunism.” Both aspects of his personality would come through in his role at the helm of *Rolling Stone*, where he would continue to face criticism for his celeb-hounding and opportunistic attitude.

It was also during his time at Berkeley that he first started writing about rock and roll in the university’s *Daily Cal*. He called his column “Something’s Happening” and signed it “Mr. Jones,” a reference to Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of the Thin Man.” In this song, Dylan sings, “Something is happening here and you don’t know what it is/ Do you, Mr. Jones?” These lyrics symbolized for many young

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3 Draper, 42.

4 Ibid.

people the disconnect between those who were in the know and those who were not, and Wenner used them as signal to indicate that he was part of the hip counterculture. He quickly became the psychedelic San Francisco scene’s best source of inside information, as well as a well-respected critic of its music.

While at Cal, Wenner met his mentor Ralph Gleason, a jazz critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, through connections in the Berkeley countercultural scene. Gleason was one of the only prominent music critics in the country who championed rock and roll. According to Wenner, “Ralph saw what rock ‘n’ roll was about, and he saw it before anyone stared writing seriously about it. He saw the value and the joy in rock ‘n’ roll…I couldn’t have started Rolling Stone without him.” He became a “high priest to the Berkeley students—some of them dropouts—who started Rolling Stone magazine in the late 1960s,” particularly Wenner, supporting him, guiding him, and lending him credibility.

Gleason had been a groundbreaker in his own heyday, having introduced the first jazz column in a major U.S. publication at the San Francisco Chronicle in 1950. He was from a generation of music writers who showed little interest in rock and roll, if not outright distaste for it. The fact that he championed it in his writing made him an early role model for new rock critics. Wenner recalls, “He sort of took me

6 Draper, 139.
7 John Gennari, Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, USA 06/2006 p
under his wing, this schleppy kid who didn’t know much about anything.”

Gleason believed in Wenner, and he used his connections to get him an exciting job as entertainment editor at the Sunday Ramparts.

Sunday Ramparts was a spinoff of Ramparts magazine. Ramparts was founded in 1962 as an outlet for intellectual Catholic writers, but it soon became known for reviving the tradition of muckraking. In particular, it was highly critical of the Vietnam war. “At its peak,” writes one chronicler, “Ramparts magazine was America’s premier leftist publication.” Ramparts hired several young radical writers, some of whom, like Wenner, would continue to have an influence on the liberal news media for decades to come. Wenner was brought on board when the magazine decided to start a bi-weekly tabloid edition, the Sunday Ramparts, during a San Francisco newspaper strike in 1966. He was hired as the entertainment editor, focusing on cultural events in the same vein as the magazine’s content in general: radical art and music, particularly from the Bay Area. Sunday Ramparts folded in 1967, a scant nine months after its first issue. Wenner would replicate many aspects of the magazine, mostly aesthetic, when he started Rolling Stone.

8 Hank Bordowitz, Turning Points in Rock and Roll, 139.


10 Rolling Stone is the most popular magazine founded by a Ramparts vet, but the muckraking tradition was most prominently passed on to Mother Jones, a far-left magazine founded by several Ramparts vets in 1976. Other alums went on to work at major outlets throughout the United States. See: Peter Richardson, A Bomb in Every Issue: How the Short, Unruly Life of Ramparts Magazine Changed America, i.
In 1967, with Gleason’s clout behind him, Wenner asked his family and friends for help funding his own magazine. Beginning with $7,500 in seed money, *Rolling Stone* was modeled after underground newspapers that were springing up across the country. The most successful of these was the “grandfather of the hip newspapers,” the *Village Voice*.11 The Sixties efflorescence of alternative publications, which began around 1964 and peaked in 1967, were often politically radical, aimed at providing an alternative to the straight, consensus media and giving a voice to activists and counterculturalists. By 1969, there were more than 125 underground publications in the United States, with a combined circulation of three million readers.12

*Rolling Stone* was established in 1967, only a little more than a year after the introduction of rock criticism, and around the peak of the underground press movement. With the rapid acceleration of the demand for music writing, a scramble began among prominent publishers to tap into the obvious market; meanwhile, underground newspapers were established by countercultural writers. They both aimed at the same audience, but their ideologies were different. On the one hand, major companies entered the fray with the bald determination to profit off the cultural phenomenon. On the other, hippie capitalists claimed that their interest was in serving the countercultural community. It was at the intersection between the

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12 Ibid.
countercultural market and the burgeoning underground newspaper scene that

*Rolling Stone* found its audience.

*Rolling Stone* captured the aesthetics of the underground press, especially at first. Its earliest editions looked more like a newspaper than a magazine, with roughly hewn edges and quarter-fold sheets, which “struck some readers as a slightly upscale underground newspaper.”

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The layout of the magazine was also borrowed; “[r]ight away, the newspaper—which is what it was in the beginning—reminded observant readers around San Francisco of the *Sunday Ramparts*...”\(^\text{14}\) The print featured a drop capital, a large initial capital letter, a stylistic choice copied directly from *Ramparts*. Even the actual layout board for the magazine was recycled from *Sunday Ramparts*. But the magazine soon dumped its underground aesthetic. Over the first two years of its existence, the look and layout of the magazine were refined. The newspaper-style was eventually replaced with a full color photo on the front page and the paper quality was improved. In 1969 *Vogue* called it “expertly designed,” saying “its conventional layout, mirroring that of the ‘establishment’ press, ascribed it an air of authority.”\(^\text{15}\)

However much it took of its visual style, unlike *Ramparts*, *Rolling Stone* was not explicitly political. Although it exhibited a leftist political orientation, it was not radical in any real way. Wenner once said that one of the common experiences of his generation was “taking a billy club over the head,”\(^\text{16}\) but although he had been present during the political turmoil in the Bay Area in the early Sixties, his own commitment and involvement to the movement was minimal. His head had never been in any such danger, according to his peers, who described the height of his involvement as holding out a microphone behind Mario Savio while he gave his

\(^{14}\) *Rolling Stone Interviews*, 1.


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
famous 1964 Sproul Hall speech. However, some of the magazine’s writers were much more involved in far left political movements. Notably, Mike Lydon had covered the Civil Rights Movement for the *Boston Globe*, reporting on the disappearance of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman from Mississippi in 1964. And although some of the writers’ politics did come through in some of the magazine’s early articles, the extent of their engagement with political issues varied from writer to writer. There was no unified political voice, and if anything, the large majority of articles either mentioned political issues obliquely or not at all. So, although there were political undercurrents involved, the magazine was in no way as political as *Ramparts* or even the *Village Voice*. Even in later years when it became more overtly political in the 1970s, it was a more mainstream liberal politics than its more radical peers.

Almost immediately, *Rolling Stone* faced criticism for leaving behind the underground press’s radical content. One such denunciation came from the Underground Press Syndicate, which singled out *Rolling Stone* in a “heated condemnation of artists and producers who exploit hip themes and life-styles without reimbursing the hip community.”¹⁷ According to historian John McMillan, the magazine met with similar accusations at a 1969 meeting of the Underground Press Syndicate, where,

> [r]adicals had especially harsh words for *Rolling Stone*...From a marketing standpoint, Wenner’s approach was both genius and cunning; his magazine

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was generally favorable toward the cultural and the commodifiable aspects of the youth rebellion—especially rock and roll—while thumbing its nose at New Left political activism. As a result, the magazine was able to lure advertisers and readers that were apprehensive about the Movement’s growing militancy.\textsuperscript{18}

Because Wenner co-opted certain aspects of the underground press, he was vulnerable to criticism from those who considered themselves legitimate representatives of the underground. To them, \textit{Rolling Stone} was a fraud, exploiting the counterculture for profit.

According to the \textit{Oxford Encyclopedia of Popular Music}, “Wenner shrewdly avoided ephemeral trappings and, although chronicling the counterculture, his publication maintained an editorial distance bordering on ambivalence.”\textsuperscript{19} Although the magazine’s commitment to its politics turned out to be lackluster, they certainly capitalized on their vague countercultural identity as they amassed a following. In January of 1968, they published a letter to the editor that read, “Sirs: You dirty, drug-dropping beatniks. I am enclosing the money for a six-month subscription. We all know you’re pinkos using rock and roll as a front.” \textit{Stone’s} response: “You’re right.”\textsuperscript{20} The magazine was already on its way to being a commercial success on the back of this image, all the while edging closer to what it would become: “the perfect

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{20} Letters to the Editor, \textit{Rolling Stone}, January 20, 1968, 2.
pink child of capitalism triumphant.” 21 In this way, *Rolling Stone* served as a liaison between corporations and the elusive but lucrative countercultural market. To successfully accomplish this, it was crucial that the magazine portrayed itself in such a way as to appeal to an audience with anti-corporate sentiments.

In Wenner’s words, “We’re on the line between so many dichotomies. We’re on the line between underground versus above-ground press, between newspaper and magazine, between being a trade paper and a consumer paper, between dope and music.” 22 However it positioned itself, *Rolling Stone* was simply not an underground newspaper, as it lacked many of the most important features that defined the counterculture, particularly its disdain of capitalism and its emphasis on political meanings in culture. The milieu from which it emerged, its early audience, and its subject matter gave it the cachet of a hippie capitalist enterprise, but it soon became apparent that it was no such thing. Pop historian Simon Frith writes of *Rolling Stone*’s success as part of a wider phenomenon that was occurring in hippie culture:

> The most important rock 'n' roll impresarios preciously had been outsiders, seizing on stars opportunistically (like Colonel Parker on Elvis Presley). The San Francisco operators, in contrast, emerged from within the new audience itself, and so disguised the exploitation involved in the rock marketplace in

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the name of “the rock community.” The political significance of this was not that rock was co-opted, but that the terms of its cooptation were concealed.\textsuperscript{23}

In appealing to an audience whose anti-consumerist ideals made them difficult to capture as a market, Wenner’s enterprise tapped into one of the main areas where the hippies were willing to spend their money: music. Frith writes, “Pop commercialism was so blatant that pop fans could never forget their consumer status; rock fans, by contrast, could treat record-buying as an act of solidarity.”\textsuperscript{24}

By positioning the magazine as part of the counterculture, Wenner firmly connected his advertisers with an elusive, lucrative market. He also actively courted members of the music industry, as seen in a 1969 full-page advertisement taken out in \textit{Billboard} magazine. The copy read, “If you are a corporate executive trying to understand what’s happening to youth today, you cannot be without \textit{Rolling Stone}.”\textsuperscript{25} Apparently, the advice did not go unheeded, as Alice Echols shows in \textit{Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershock}, “Record companies that had scorned rock ‘n’ roll as music that ‘smells but sells,’ now courted rock musicians and made \textit{Rolling Stone} required reading for their executives.”\textsuperscript{26}

In the pages of the magazine, a justification was formed for their cozy relationship to the music industry. In a 1968 article about the L.A. scene, author

\textsuperscript{23} Simon Frith, “Rock and the Politics of Memory,” (??), 66.
\textsuperscript{24} Frith, ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Billboard}, Mar 15, 1969, 77.
\textsuperscript{26} Echols, \textit{Shaky Ground}, 40.
Jerry Hopkins describes a record company functionary called the “company freaks.” These were essentially A&R people, liaising between artists and the record company, as well as introducing the music press to their talent. The article, as sometimes happens in early *Rolling Stone* pieces about the industry, is like pulling back the curtain a little. It creates an opportunity to assess how the magazine saw itself in the scheme of the cultural machinery. Hopkins writes,

> In the area of hip flackery, the "company freaks" more often than not deal with the underground newspapers—a medium most record companies consider important. So the companies, acting through the staff long-hairs, make it more than easy for the Los Angeles Free Press and Open City writers to attend recording sessions, interview musicians, etc., while, of course, the underground press turns around and pays its printer with record company advertising money. In L.A., the so-called underground (Anderle prefers to call it the "barely-above-ground") and the Establishment indulge in a lot of mutual back-scratching.  

Although Hopkins does not explicitly include *Rolling Stone* in his examples of the underground press, other articles in the magazine from the same period indicate that this is the way the magazine’s owner and editors envisioned the publication at the time. It’s likely that *Rolling Stone* ’s staff thought of its role similar terms, as though its shoulder rubbing and mutually beneficial relationship with the record companies was subversive. The gist of the argument is that it is okay for underground publications to accept industry money because they were only using the companies for their own ends. This was the slippery slope *Rolling Stone* would slide down over the years.

As *Rolling Stone* ’s circulation increased, so did advertisement revenues. In 1967, the magazine sold only 6,000 copies of 40,000 it had printed.\(^\text{28}\) By 1969, its readership had reached sixty thousand.\(^\text{29}\) For comparison, the *Voice* had the largest circulation of any underground publication at that time with 130,000 subscribers, while the next-largest, the *L.A. Free Press*, had 85,000.\(^\text{30}\) The lightning-quick growth of the magazine was a major selling point to advertisers, particularly record companies, instrument manufacturers, and others within the music industry.

According to American Studies scholar Lisa Rhodes, “By early 1968, *Rolling Stone* could number almost every major record company among its advertising accounts, including Atlantic, Capital, Columbia, Reprise, Elektra, A&M, Warner, and RCA.”\(^\text{31}\)

As advertisement revenue shot up, the magazine began to move into the black, a feat that had taken the *Village Voice* over a decade to achieve.

With the influx of money, the magazine faced a conflict of interest between what their audience expected and what sold advertisements. Hippie capitalism was a product of the countercultural backlash against the establishment. Capitalism was the bugaboo for many of the Sixties generation, whether it was their primary enemy or

\(^{28}\) *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s*, 243.


not. For many counterculturalists, it represented the unresponsive and irresponsible dominant culture. Though many hippies were socialists, others were either apolitical or less politically radical. However, discontent with the capitalist system was common, even when explicit political aims were not involved. The problem was not with profitability, as historian Terry Anderson has pointed out:

Critics mocked the movement for attacking capitalism while establishing profitable businesses such as Celestial Seasonings or Rolling Stone Magazine. This seemed like an inconsistency but, on closer inspection, it was not. The movement was a large social phenomenon, not on an organization, party, or club espousing a common anticapitalist ideology. \(^{32}\)

Wenner had never denied that he wanted to make money, but he had printed criticisms of enterprises in which the consumer’s interests were subordinated to business interests.

One example was the very first article in the very first edition of Rolling Stone, entitled, “The High Cost of Peace and Love: Where’s the Money from Monterrey?” In the article, author Michael Lydon was critical of the festival, which was supposed to be non-profit. He attempted to hold the concert promoters accountable to their audience, questioning how the money from the event was handled. The main problem, in his view, was the gap between the promises of the organizers and the reality. He wrote, “many of the Festival’s expenses, however

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reasonable to Taylor, seem out of keeping with its announced spirit. The Festival’s management, with amateurish good will, lavished generosity on their friends.”

The gap between expectation and reality was what was problematic. By making it non-profit, Lydon argued, the organizers opened themselves to criticism when their promises of charitable donations went unfulfilled or when money was misspent. *Rolling Stone* was acting as a consumer advocate, holding promoters responsible to the public. “In ironic fact, what happened at the Festival and its financial affairs looks in many ways like the traditional Charity Ball in hippie drag,” Lydon said. The image of a traditional business venture in “hippie drag” is an image that works when applied to *Rolling Stone* as well, though of course there would never be an acknowledgement of that in the magazine’s pages. The criticism of the festival continued,

months after the Mamas and Papa closed the show early Monday morning, a slightly bad taste still remains. What was a festival to some, was a free ride to others. Most artists got there with talent, some with pull. A festival which should, and could, have been all up front still leaves questions asked and unanswered.

The notion of having a responsibility to be “up front” with the program’s choices, or that there was some moral obligation involved in being the middle man between rock musicians and their fans, contrasted glaringly with Stone’s own behavior. In


34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.
this and other articles, *Rolling Stone* positioned itself as an advocate of rock consumers. In addition to this very early case in which the publication acted as a watchdog, *Rolling Stone* writers, including Wenner, regularly criticized “establishment” figures in the music business, such as DJs, radio executives, record companies, event organizers, and those involved in other music publications.

One figure the magazine discussed was Bill Graham, a San Francisco concert impresario around whom questions of the relationship between the music industry and the hip community circulated. In early 1969, Graham, promoter and owner of the renowned venues the Fillmore East (in New York) and the Fillmore West (in San Francisco), encountered staunch resistance to what was viewed as his exploitation of the hip community for profit. On one side was Graham, for whom profit was key and who was “deeply concerned with operating his business at maximum efficiency.” On the other side was a New York-based hippie group called the Motherfuckers who felt that their culture was being co-opted for Graham’s profit. Their spokesman Ben Morea asserted,

> We're not a business — we're a people who feel we have a culture which we want access to, that's been taken from us, and that's being used to make money for other people. We don't want just a show, we want to go back to those original attempts at having a community culture, not a money-making thing. By nature of the conflict, they're into making money, and we're into living.\(^\text{36}\)

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Playing the mediator, this article tries to find the balance between the two factions. It describes “The Choice,”

On Saturday, December 28, the important thing happened. Bill said to the community: 'Look, when are you going to face up to the fact that you've blown it here? You can't have the Fillmore. You have made that impossible.' Their answer was: 'You made it this way. You resisted us. You caused the trouble.'

Then, Bill said: 'Look, I'm not trying to buy you off, but you find another place, you find a constructive, realistic program that works within the framework of the law — even if it is inherently an attempt to change that law — and I will support it. I'll support it administratively, I'll support it technically, I'll see that you get talent over there, and I'll support it financially.'

And he laid it out — very, very detailed. Some of them said, 'Yes, this makes sense. Let's do it.' Some of the Motherfuckers said, 'No, we want the Fillmore.' Bill described figures of several thousand dollars a month.

Laying out the two sides to the issue in such a reasonable fashion indicates neutrality and an interest in delving into the question of what role capitalism played in the counterculture. This preoccupation indicates that the magazine found such questions relevant to their readers’ interests. Their audience deserved to understand the ethical issues involved in the production and dissemination of the products they consumed and the businesses they patronized. Perhaps it also indicates some self-awareness as far as Rolling Stone’s own compromised position in the culture.

Several months after this article was published, an article on Graham written by Ben Fong Torres (one of the best writers in the magazine’s employ and one of its senior editors) was far less neutral. It indicated not only a willingness to take a strong oppositional approach to such divisive capitalist figures, but also the desire to position Rolling Stone as part of the hippie resistance to commercial exploitation. The piece, “Bill Graham Explodes: I’m Quitting San Francisco,” features the lede,
“The fat lady sings as the legendary concert promoter closes his club and loses his
shit.”37 Fong-Torres describes Graham as “long ostracized from the hip community
as a profiteer and the target of as much abuse as respect,” saying he “really blew his
gnarled top.” Fong-Torres even printed a paragraph-long transcription of a meltdown
Graham had at a press conference that ended with him yelling, “You slimy little man
... YOU SLIMY ... LITTLE ... MAN. (To the crowd): Fuck you. FUCK YOU! (To a
musician trying to calm him) Don't get peaceful with me. Don't you TOUCH me!”38
This savaging of Graham was due to his clashes within the hippie capitalist scene,
particularly a recent strike against him by the Light Artists Guild. The piece
positions Graham as exploitative of the hip community, quoting one of his
opponents as saying he was on an “establishment trip,” saying that he was
“prostituting” the “only new art form left in this City.”39

Fong-Torres wrote that when “contacted last week, a still-petulant Graham at
first refused to talk with Rolling Stone, citing the publication as ‘one of the other
reasons I’m getting out.’”40 This quote, especially when juxtaposed with the
depiction of the vitriol-spewing capitalist bogeyman Graham, clearly positions
Rolling Stone as antithetical to Graham and his approach. However convinced Fong-

37 Ben Fong-Torres, “Bill Graham Explodes: I’m Quitting San Francisco,”
Rolling Stone, September 6, 1969.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Torres and the rest of the Rolling Stone crew were that they were on the side of right when it came to the exploitation of the hip community, it would soon become apparent that Rolling Stone would achieve its great success in a way that elicited similar criticisms.

Despite the gap between the way Rolling Stone positioned itself and the reality of its editors’ motivations, young people trusted the magazine and looked to it as a cultural touchstone. It came to have an enormous, and perhaps a singularly powerful, effect on the popularity of musicians by helping to steer their readers’ taste. Rolling Stone had the ability to make musicians’ careers by simply featuring them in the magazine. One of the best illustrations of the publication’s rising power in the industry came in December 1968, when it published a feature on the Texas music scene introducing unsigned guitarist Johnny Winter. Within months of the article’s publication, offers from major labels rolled in, culminating in a $600,000 record deal with Columbia—the highest signing bonus ever given at that time.

One of the reasons for Rolling Stone’s success at breaking new artists was its unparalleled ability to capture and convey musical scenes to a national audience that looked to them as a cultural guide. This was never as obvious as with the case of Johnny Winter. “Tribute to the Lone Star State: Dispossessed Men and Mothers of Texas” by Larry Sepulvado and John Burks is solid writing that effectively did what Rolling Stone was best at—explaining rock and roll music’s context. “Blues is all over Texas and the roots go deep,” they wrote,

Blind Lemon Jefferson came out of Wortham, turn of the century, with a moaning, crying blues style that set the tone for generations of Texas
bluesmen. He often crossed the paths with Leadbelly, who, while Louisiana-born, worked the breadth of Texas and spread his message. Lightnin' Hopkins dug them both; learned at the feet of Blind Lemon, he has said. T-Bone Walker, born in Linden, raised in Waxahachie, was the first of the blues guitarists to make it nation-wide with heavy-selling recordings, years before B. B. King... New generations heard these men, absorbed what they had to say and developed the Texas genre...No one tradition has produced all the rock players that are now coming out of Texas' vast expanses (267,339 square miles). Gospel – black and white – and hill-billy music coexist and mingle with the blues to form the common aural heritage of Lyndon Johnson's birth-state. 41

Such elaborate referential descriptions of the influences on the music of the state allows the reader at home to imagine what the sound was like based on music they already knew. When trying to convince an audience that the unfamiliar was worth their attention, including unsigned artists they couldn’t access, it was necessary not only to relate it to the familiar, but also explain why it was interesting and unique.

“It's hard for a non-Texan to understand how so much that's good could come out of such a wrong place,” the article said.42 But that’s exactly what the goal of the article was—to explain to the at-home reader what the scene was like, why it was like it was, and try to get at how it came to be. One of the ways they accomplished this was to set the scene in other respects, including a frank discussion of the racial environment:

It's no easy life for a black musician in Texas, no matter how good he is. Says Ed Guinn, bass player with the Conqueroo and a black man: "People are really weird back there. It's tough for a longhair. They treat longhairs just like

41 Larry Sepulvado and John Burks, “Tribute to the Lone Star State: Dispossessed Men and Mothers of Texas,” Rolling Stone, December 7, 1968.

42 Ibid.
they treat colored. And it can be tough for Negroes – particularly if you're some hot-head militant. In Texas you know you're a Nigger and if you act like one, everything's cool...It's a clear-cut and very Southern racial thing most places in Texas. Everybody, white and black, knows his place. White folks and blacks keep pretty neatly divided. Except for the musicians.

Rock and roll in the late Sixties was a culture where black music was highly valued. The blues revival brought black musicians contributions to rock and roll to the fore, and white fans were growing to appreciate their work in a way that they had not done before. In this light, adding the racial analysis to the article did more than explain the sound, it added a sense of gravity to it. The authors presumed that they were addressing an audience that sympathized with the plight of southern blacks and for whom racial mixing amongst musicians would be viewed as a positive, progressive movement.

While Wenner made his name and fortune from tapping into the interests of countercultural youth, the level of commitment to liberal causes in the pages of his magazine was inconsistent in its early years. Stone’s coverage of black music was limited but regular, and what coverage there was often avoided getting overtly into racial politics. Wenner’s own record on race was not great. He mostly ignored race in his own reviews, and although other writers like dug into the issue, Rolling Stone was by-and-large a white-oriented magazine. In 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr. died, Wenner dismissively proclaimed that his death “meant little or nothing to the majority of the American people,” indicating a fundamental myopia about the
importance of racial freedom to Americans, both black and white.\textsuperscript{43} Exacerbating the racial problem of the magazine was the fact that, through the 1980s, Rolling Stone had never had a single black writer on staff. \textsuperscript{44} According to Robert Draper, “when black music critic Nelson George visited the magazine’s office in the early eighties, he was startled by the sea of lily-white faces. ‘I thought I’d walked in on a California beach party.’”\textsuperscript{45} Beyond the obvious problem of unequal employment, that this meant that a large proportion of the population was ignored by the magazine. Draper notes the magazine’s “infamous refusal to cover black music.”\textsuperscript{46} This was another way in which \textit{Rolling Stone} failed to live up to countercultural ideals, specifically that of racial inclusion.

By looking at some of the small proportion of articles that did discuss race or black music, it is possible to ascertain what message the magazine was sending to its readers about the issue and its commitments to it. In a 1968 end of year list, Jon Landau wrote about the best music on that had come out that year. He wrote,

Motown, which entered the year looking like it was on its last leg, ended the year holding down the top three positions on the singles charts, all at once. And Atlantic Records had its biggest year in history, ending up only second to Columbia Records in total sales. Soul music will continue to exert a major influence on all music in 1969 because of the talent and energy of its performers. The best of it will continue to be among the best pop music being made. But one must face the fact that most soul musicians and producers do

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\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Draper, 20.
\textsuperscript{45} Draper, 20.
\textsuperscript{46} Draper, 63.
\end{flushleft}
not have enough imagination to expand soul music beyond what it already is and help it continue to grow.\textsuperscript{47}

Though \textit{Rolling Stone} was not always insightful on race, some of its writers exhibited a real appreciation for black music. Landau was one of these, acknowledging its importance and influence. However, as is typical of the magazine, Landau did not engage deep-seated political and social issues involved, which was the norm for articles like these. The magazine tended to skim over racial intricacies as in this excerpt, rarely digging deep into the social and cultural factors behind black music’s production and reception. The extent of their coverage was often similarly superficial.

Occasionally, there was a more substantive commentary on race, such as in a 1968 article about Atlantic producer Jerry Wexler. Wexler was the A&R man behind some of the most successful music produced by black artists at the time, including Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, and Ray Charles. The article stated, “Having worked so closely with black artists, Jerry has very pronounced opinions on the relation of soul music and rock,” and went on to quote him criticizing the way other alternative publications treated issues of race.

One of my pet peeves is this noxious hippy use of this word 'Spade.' It's just disgusting to me the way they cavalierly throw it around in print in EVO, in the \textit{Village Voice}, and there's some, there are a lot of people who are guilty who should know better. I don't think that this word is sanctified, accepted or condoned by any Negro people, I think that our friends are working under some sort of misconception here, and I think a strong effort should be made to get it at least out of the prints, to get it out of the mouths of the critics and

writers for the 'underground newspapers,' and it's a noxious term, as bad as
that other bad word, as far as I'm concerned. The thing that angers me, is the
certitude and the self-righteousness with which the hippies use it, as though
they're privy to some esoteric knowledge to which the square world doesn't
know about. Well, it's square as could be, which is the case with so many of
the things about the hippies. It's a manifestation of their crashing
squareness.48

Wexler had a good point, and for Rolling Stone to publish it created an engagement
and dialogue with other publications about their approaches to race. Writers such as
Richard Goldstein were in the habit of using this problematic terminology, and the
criticism was valid. Sue C. Clark chose to include the quotation, posing a moral
challenge to the hip community the magazine was aimed at.

But, as is often the case with Rolling Stone, it is a subject making the
comment rather than the Rolling Stone writer. There is no commentary on this
assertion by the article’s author; it is just left as a standalone text block followed by a
change of subject. This is characteristic of Rolling Stone’s detached approach to
racial politics—and all politics—in its early days. The magazine was standoffish,
willing to present ideas about race but not as willing to express them or elaborate on
them for themselves.

At other times, their racial approach was more tone deaf, as in a 1970 article
called “The Rascals: The Blackest White Group of All.” In explaining how the

48 Sue C Clark, “A Look At The Legendary Atlantic Records Producer
Behind The Sound Of Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, And Others,” Rolling Stone,
September 28, 1968.
Rascals were so “black,” author John Lombardi gives what is basically a description of cultural co-optation, without any hint of approbation:

The reasons why records by three Italians and an Irishman with the kinds of working-class backgrounds that are usually antithetical to blacks are listened to and even purchased by blacks are, perhaps, deceptively simple. The Rascals, particularly Felix Cavaliere, beyond being dedicated to R&B and soul, understand it. If that sounds too easy, try considering that "understanding soul" has to do with letting down real barriers, bridging a couple of cultures and identifying intelligently in an almost Stanislavskian sense.

The superficial aspects of soul can be picked up easily — the vocal inflections, rhythmic, harmonic and lyrical techniques, the choreography, the jive — but an understanding of the basic sadness and bleakness that most black music covers and seeks to transcend is simply beyond the scope of white groups like the Soul Survivors, the Detroit Wheels or, in hipper circles, Janis Joplin, Al Kooper or Canned Heat. What is needed, to get it on, is a (temporary) loss of self, or more directly, the realization of another "self" in an "alien" culture.

When contrasted with the work of someone like Goldstein or Willis, who grappled with questions of white co-optation of black culture, here there is no cognizance of the ethics or morality of white musicians trying to role play as African American.

The explanation the author offers for the appeal of the Rascals is that “soul” has no race, but is a state of mind. Denying the essential blackness of black music by saying it belongs equally to white practitioners is certainly a way to make white people feel more comfortable producing and consuming it, but it takes away from the people who created and nurtured it. In this and other articles, the magazine treated racial situations indicates a fundamentally lack of self-awareness and intellectual rigor about certain social issues.
Gender politics were also a problem from the magazine’s early days, with *Rolling Stone* falling more into the status quo regarding sexism and sexuality than its liberal self-conception would suggest. There was nothing like equal representation for male and female writers on the magazine’s staff, although *Rolling Stone* did give some notable female writers the start. From its first edition, *Rolling Stone* published a female writer, Susan Lydon. She was the wife of Michael Lydon, a former reporter for *Newsweek* and a founding staff member of *Stone*. She became one of a few regular female contributors to the magazine. *Rolling Stone* fostered the careers of female critics including Lydon, Sue C. Clark, and Robin Green; however, in the early years of the magazine, they were the exception rather than the rule. Although women wrote for the magazine, they were treated as lesser employees. Sue Lydon remembers “responding with an expletive when Wenner asked her to type address labels instead of write stories.”49 Later, “only [after] a staff sit-in in his office were women permitted to attend editorial conferences.”50

Additionally, the magazine sometimes printed stories that were blatantly sexist. The most glaring example was also the first of *Rolling Stone* ’s articles to be picked up by the mainstream media. Of the fifty issues of the magazine published in the 1960s, the “Groupies” edition is one of only five that featured women on the cover.51 In the feature article, a groupie was defined as “a chick who hangs out with

50 Ibid.
51 Tina Turner was on twice.
bands.” The defining characteristic given of groupies was their sexual engagement with musicians, which reduced these young women to sexual objects. The first question asked of one of these women was in the article, “Does the name ‘groupie’ bother you?” This indicates that the author, and the magazine, knew that the term was potentially offensive. The woman to whom this question was posed replied in the affirmative, yet the word “groupie” was still plastered all over the edition.

The article policed women’s sexuality in a way that still managed to come off as hip. While it doesn’t take a negative view of the groupies specifically, it devotes significant space to delineating the terms on which such promiscuous behavior is socially acceptable. Using explicit language, the article explains the difference between “star-fuckers” and groupies, grumbling that star-fuckers “were balling names, not people, and this basically inhumane quest is not lost on the musicians, who tend, naturally enough to think of themselves as people first and Symbols second, especially in bed.” However, the contradiction between saying that men should be treated as humans rather than sex symbols and the simultaneous treatment of groupies as sexual objects in the article did not seem to occur to the authors. In fact, the magazine was so proud of the issue that it took out a full-page ad touting it in the New York Times.


53 February 15, 1969.

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A July 1970 edition of the radical feminist periodical, *Off Our Backs*, took on the article’s sexism. It called it “badly written to the point of absurdity,” saying it was “obviously…put together to pick up a couple of extra bucks.” Author Bobbie Goldstone wrote that it offered “an object lesson that any ‘liberation’—sexual or otherwise—for any women on the rock seem seems pretty much a myth and/or Ann Landers was right—men (from rock stars to Richard Nixon) don’t respect you if you do the dirty of dirties in a non-monogamous fashion.” Goldstone ended the chapter with a scorching criticism of *Rolling Stone*: “It’s true that groupies (good or bad), like most women, use men to give them status—but talk about deriving your status from being in with rock stars, talk about treating them like commodities—*Rolling Stone* is the biggest groupie of them all.”

Lisa Rhodes, in *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture*, writes that “the male writers at *Rolling Stone* wrote about women musicians much as their older generation, ideological ‘enemies’ at the ‘mainstream’ magazines did.” For instance, in an article about Joni Mitchell, the author describes the folk music scene: “Where Joan Baez is the embattled but still charming Joan of Arc of the non-violence crusade, and where Judy Collins is the regal, long-time lady-in-waiting of the folk-pop world, Joni Mitchell is a fresh, incredibly beautiful

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56 Ibid.

innocent/experienced girl/woman.” The gender-laden descriptions and lame comparisons to age-old gendered symbols (Joan of Arc, a lady-in-waiting, an innocent girl/woman) are one-dimensional, reductive, and trite, and as such made for ineffective criticism.

The word “girl” is used extensively, and obnoxiously, to describe these female artists, with no corollary when writing about men. Male performers of the same age and similar ilk were not regularly referred to as “boys.” Such infantilization of women musicians was part of a broader tendency for the magazine to place women in an inferior position to men in the rock world. The writing about women was problematic, but just as insidious was the lack of attention paid to women in general. As with race, the issue of gender inequality was rarely breeched in the pages of *Rolling Stone* in its first several years, so the magazine’s depictions of female musicians did not benefit from any self-reflection or self-criticism.

These factors, from *Rolling Stone*’s view of gender and race to its relationships with the underground and the music industry, were important at the time, but they became even more important as time went on and the influence of *Rolling Stone* on rock music and its legacy grew. Understanding the limitations of and external influences on the magazine’s music reporting is essential to understanding how they effected the way the era’s music is remembered today.

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58 Introducing Joni Mitchell, May 17, 1969
Another crucial factor that must be accounted for when trying to understand the way *Rolling Stone* engaged its material and audience was the fact that the magazine was helmed by such a strong personality, Jann Wenner. Music historian Hank Bordowitz writes, “For *Crawdaddy!* and its ilk, rock may as well have existed in a vacuum. Wenner saw *Rolling Stone* as a rock magazine, but a rock magazine that dealt with its subject in the broader context of popular culture as it related to…Jann Wenner.”59 Other writers, approached the music in a highly personal fashion. However, the influence of writers like Goldstein’s personal taste was more transparent than it was in *Rolling Stone*. Whereas Goldstein made his process part of his reviews, the influence of Wenner’s taste was an unacknowledged factor in not only his own articles but also in the choice of stories he published by other writers.

Wenner’s aims in starting *Rolling Stone* were not as purely idealistic as they seemed, and it was not just his approach to hippie capitalism that came into question. He soon showed that he was more interested in socializing with rock stars than in the movement or even the music. This meant that an aesthetic or ethical approach to some of the subjects in the magazine took second place to Wenner’s personal, ego-driven interests. This did not sit well with the contributors to the magazine who sought to hold their work to a higher standard. One *Rolling Stone* editor said, “Here we were, believing we were involved in the greatest cultural revolution since the sack of Rome. And he was running around with starlets. We thought that Jann was

the most trivial sort of fool.” Wenner himself once remarked that he started the magazine to meet John Lennon.

Wenner had a reputation, for better or for worse, as a rock superfan. Louis Menand calls him “[a]n opportunistic, sentimental, shrewd celebrity-hound.” Wenner was not the only early rock writer who was fanatical about the form, nor the only one to personalize his experience of the music. Subjectivity was a crucial part of the New Journalism style that *Rolling Stone* and other early rock writers emulated, meaning that their love of the music was often a major feature in the genre.

Wenner’s apparent inability to separate his personal feelings, goals, and opinions from the content of the magazine was not the problem as much as his failure to render these elements transparent to his readers. In the early days of *Rolling Stone*, his influence resulted in the near-deification of some artists. This was the case for the Beatles and Bob Dylan (whose song, “Like a Rolling Stone,” gave the magazine its name), and to a slightly lesser degree, the Rolling Stones.

The Beatles were at the top of the pantheon. Wenner wrote in 1967, “To match the Beatles is impossible; instead of dropping what you do, develop it from within as far as it will go, and rock and roll, as the Beatles demonstrate time after time.”

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60 Draper, 34.

61 Ibid.

time, can go a long way.”*63 They were the ultimate band, not only for Wenner but also for millions of young people. However, most fans did not wield the kind of influence Wenner did, and his untempered admiration for the group helped cement their place at the top of the rock pantheon.

In his 1968 review of their *White Album*, Wenner opens a panegyric by referring to, “Our Boys, The Beatles, who are the perfect product and result of everything that rock and roll means and encompasses.”*64 The difference between the article that followed and reviews by people like Ellen Willis and Richard Goldstein, who were also die-hard Beatles fans, is in its lack of nuance. Rather than admitting any complications in the album or criticizing it, Wenner goes on the attack against anyone who dared to question the album’s transcendent perfection. His tone was protective to the point of snarling, and it was clear that he took the issue very personally:

By attempting such a grandiose project with such deliberation and honesty, they have left themselves extremely vulnerable… it is on every level an explanation and an understanding of who and what the Beatles are. As usual, the personal honesty is met with an attack. (The secret is that innocence is invulnerable, and those who rush too quickly for the kill, are just themselves dead.) On the level of musical ignorance, I read the very first review of this record that appeared; it was in the New York Times. In about 250 words the "critic" dismissed the album as being neither as good as the Big Brother *Cheap Thrills* LP nor as the forthcoming Blood, Sweat and Tears album. You come up with only one of two answers about that reviewer: he is either deaf


or he is evil.\textsuperscript{65}

In a single short paragraph Wenner labels other reviewers as dead, ignorant, deaf, evil, and snarkily calls them “critics,” using scare quotes—all for the sin of denying the Beatles’ abject perfection. The album was important and was generally received well, with many critics rating it as being of the highest quality, an assessment that still stands today. The problem lay not in the positive review, but in the unqualified praise and lack of balance in his adulation. He uses the word “perfect” fifteen times in the article, and admits no shortcomings in the record. Even when discussing the album’s songs that were of lesser quality, he hedges, “If these are weaker songs, they are the only flaws of this album set. It is a relatively minor point, and considered at a longer view, an almost irrelevant one. No creative persons in history were able to match their own brilliance with absolute consistency.”\textsuperscript{66}

Wenner even enlisted the Beatles in his journalistic philosophy. Michael R. Frontani, in \textit{Beatles: Image and the Media}, explains,

\begin{quote}
The Beatles, central to Wenner’s assault on “straight” society and the mainstream press, emerge in the pages of Rolling Stone as the standard-bearers for countercultural values. Striking back at mainstream “‘press’ [that had] distorted the picture of being…Beatle-people,” Wenner argued, “What they are doing is putting their responsibilities on us…That’s how corrupt the press, magazines, newspapers and media in general has become. And everyone suspects it. The Beatles know it, and thus are contemptuous of the press and not piteously grateful.”\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid. \\
\end{flushright}
In this passage, Wenner positions himself alongside the Beatles as fighting together against the corrupt media. The implication is not only that the press is giving Beatles an unfair shake, but that it is evidence of a lack of integrity. He converted his adoration for the Beatles into a mission to champion the counterculture, which in his mind was inextricable from Beatles fandom. His entire worldview was built around being a Beatles fan.

Although the Beatles were the primary object of Wenner’s affections, they were only one act of many that got such star treatment. According to his biographer, Robert Draper, if there was a moment when he realized that he had finally arrived, it happened in 1968,

I came to New York then,” he says, “and before that I had been writing letters to Dylan saying, ‘Why don’t you call me,’ and ‘Let’s get together sometime,’ and this, that and the other thing. Then one day I got back to my hotel, and there was this message that had been left for me. It said: ‘Mr. Dylan called.’

For Wenner, the sign of his magazine’s success was his access to rock stars, which sometimes interfered with that magazine’s integrity. Louis Menand writes, “[Wenner] met Lennon; and he met and made pals with many more of his generation’s entertainment idols—who once they had become friends, and with or without editorial justification, turned up regularly on the covers of his magazine.”

As time went on and the success of the magazine grew, Wenner’s celebrity worship

68 Ibid.

showed no sign of stopping. In the 1970s, an article about Wenner’s growing media empire said, “[Jann Wenner] is never going to be considered a Mencken or a Ross, even if he is emotionally shaken every time he sees a rerun of ‘Citizen Kane.’ He wants too much to get his name in Time magazine and have lunch with Jacqueline Onassis.”

Wenner biographer Robert Draper writes, “Jann Wenner would not give the revolution his time. He wore pinstripes now, and around the warring world he breezed, getting stoned with his idols.”

This attitude toward celebrities came through in the overall tone of the magazine, not just Wenner’s pieces, as evidenced in a 1969 article about the Rolling Stones by Jerry Hopkins. Hopkins’ portrait of the Stones is focuses on Mick Jagger more than the band, and on him as an individual more than as a musician. It captured the spectacle of a Jagger performance,

Jagger bowed from the waist from stage left, right and center. He rolled his eyes like Eddie Cantor. He waved, wagging a limp wrist that could have won him Tangents’ Dream Date of the Year award. Finally he found the microphone. "Sorry you had to wait so long," he said. "We had to wait, too—right?" ...During the instrumental break, Jagger bobbed his hips at the audience, then sprinted for one side of the stage, where he peered into the balcony and started moving his mouth as if he were eating a giant-sized ear of corn: chop chop chop. His arms and legs seemed as if controlled by puppet strings.

70 John Leonard, Review.
The description of Jagger the personality isn't problematic and paints a vivid picture. But it comes at the cost of an effective musical description. The article comes across like a fluff piece in a fan magazine, and this was the trap that Rolling Stone tended to fall into. Whereas other writers like Goldstein and Willis sometimes tended to take the music too seriously, the tone of Rolling Stone sometimes skewed superficial. Whereas the imagery enables the reader to picture Mick Jagger, it is does not effectively convey what the experience of seeing the band was like because it is myopically focused on Jagger’s persona and stage antics.

Wenner’s strong personal feelings about his favorite bands meant that his work did not function in the way the subjective approach of New Journalism did. Rather than prompting an exploration of the feelings the band elicited in him and what they meant in a deeper sense, Wenner’s feelings went unexamined and passed into the record without mitigation. Menand writes,

> The person who thinks Mick is cool is the perfect person to run a magazine devoted to serious fandom. But he is an obvious liability at a magazine devoted to serious criticism. Wenner was not a devotee of the authentic, not even a hypocritical one. He was a hustler: he believed in show biz, and saw, for instance, nothing unethical about altering a review to please a record company he hoped to have as an advertiser. “We’re gonna be better than Billboard” is the sort of thing he would say to encourage his staff when morale was low.73

Wenner’s affection for the celebrities covered in Rolling Stone brought him into conflict with others who had a less reverent attitude toward rock stars. A harsh and forthright criticism came from Lester Bangs, who worked from the magazine

beginning in 1969, and left due to a clash over a review in 1973, although he would continue to write for them sporadically as a freelancer through the late 1970s. When asked his opinion on *Rolling Stone*, he said,

> I knew it was a piece of shit. The reviews I did for them really stuck out like sore thumbs. And I never did get along with Jann, because he really likes the suck-up type of writing. He doesn't like people that are stylists unless it's somebody he wants to suck up to himself, like Norman Mailer or Truman Capote or someone like that… I was never on the staff at *Rolling Stone*. I freelanced for them from that point, which was like March of 1969, until about '73, I guess, when Jann Wenner threw me out for being, quote, "Disrespectful to musicians," end quote. I wrote a review of Canned Heat, an album called New Age, that said, "Why do we love Canned Heat? Let us count the ways. We love them because they did the longest boogie ever put on record. We love them because..." I mean it was making fun of them. I guess you're not supposed to do that. Well, obviously not in that magazine.\(^74\)

What sort of magazine was it, if not “that magazine?” The notion of being “disrespectful to musicians” shines a light on one of the major shortcomings of the magazine—the tendency to prioritize other interests over that of the connection between the critic and the audience.

With someone like Bangs, or any other great rock critics, it is easy to see his motivations. He makes clear that his intention is to describe the music as he perceives it to an audience, whether they are likely to agree with him or not. The problem with Wenner and *Rolling Stone* is that these motivations were less clear. Transparency was part of the rock journalism style, and when obfuscation was

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involved, whether because of Wenner’s personal tastes or the magazine’s financial interests, it did not sit well with a critic like Bangs.

The expectation of transparency came not only from the journalistic field, but also because the brand of rock that *Rolling Stone* championed was fundamentally tied to the counterculture. Placing people over products was an essential part of the anti-capitalist ethic that was a central tenet for many in the counterculture. Rock historian Lisa Rhodes writes,

*Rolling Stone* became so influential in music journalism partly because many of its readers thought it was “incorruptible.” Certainly the magazine accepted ads from record companies, but the readers believed the writers, and especially the editor, to be motivated by ethics that reflected the new ideology of the ‘younger generation.’ These ethics, loosely translated, held that some things were more important than money, rock music being one of them. 75

However, *Rolling Stone* failed to live up to this expectation, placing the financial interests and magazine’s relationships with artists and recording companies above the truth. The personal integrity of the critic was therefore potentially compromised when writing for *Rolling Stone*.

A look at the type of article that caused Bangs and Wenner to butt heads shows that the pieces that got Bangs blackballed at *Rolling Stone* were very like his other work (which is discussed at length in the next chapter). They were potentially offensive to the readers. More polemical than the usual content of *Rolling Stone*, the contrast shows the staider nature of most *Rolling Stone* writing. One of the final

75 Rhodes, 49.
pieces Bangs did for *Rolling Stone*, a review of a Neil Diamond album, was certainly provocative and harsh. He wrote,

> Attending the release of this sluice of ultimorgasmic sounds from Meister D. is some of the grooviest garnish this side of a Melanie presskit. Here on the very front cover is Neil in full flight, working it on out and what is he doing? Pretending to jerk off, that's what. He's pantomiming whanging his clanger, and from the look on his face I'd say he's about to shoot off, and the only bogus part is that he'd like everybody out there to think it's 13 inches long. It's truly a pic to post in your den or rec room for years to come, no matter what some o' them psychedelic schmucks with their Hawkwind nightshade garlands might think; you don't even need a black light, and it's great to spill beer on or throw your girlfriend up against in the party's latter leagues.\(^{76}\)

The piece is vulgar, but also funny and exciting to read. If it elicits cringes, it’s at the expense of what Bangs views as common, middlebrow tastes. Whereas more alternative, underground publications published Bangs without a problem, this type of writing was not *Rolling Stone* fodder. Wenner did not wish to alienate his more mainstream readers or the musicians they liked. Bangs’ brief employment was representative of the outer limits of *Rolling Stone*’s riskiness insofar as music writers went.

*Rolling Stone* was presented as an underground publication by its subject matter, audience, and appearance. Underground publications were so-called not because they were secret, but because they catered to an audience outside of the mainstream. Wenner's target audience included those people, but did not cater to them at the risk of losing the magazine’s more conventional followers. The writers

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who formed most *Rolling Stone’s* staff could sound hip and countercultural without risking much. Bangs was not the ideal writer for a magazine that was seeking a broad audience and the advertising revenues that came with it.

Wenner’s disposition toward rock stars, his conception of his audience’s expectations, and how these affected his writers is a mitigating factor in how *Rolling Stone’s* effect on the shape of rock history should be appraised. To the extent that *Rolling Stone* has helped mold the narrative of the Sixties rock counterculture, Wenner’s own opinions have entered notions of canonicity. Although they were often reflective of wider tastes, they were not always, and the undue influence Wenner exerted should be accounted for when considering the canon’s ultimate shape.

Outside of its role in shaping the tastes of rock fans and rock’s subsequent canon, the most enduring contribution *Rolling Stone* made to rock writing was the long-form “Interview” feature, which “became a byword for lengthy, detailed examinations of musicians, their work and overall philosophies.”77 It was one of the pillars of the magazine’s success, offering a fresh take on the stars who felt so familiar to fans.

The *Rolling Stone* “Interview” was a central feature of the magazine from its earliest days. The format was modeled on similar features in *Playboy* and *The Paris Review*, in which cultural figures were asked about their art, the artistic process, and

their lives. In this fashion, “the Rolling Stone Interviews would try to examine—in depth, details and the theories of the craft itself—styles of working habits and processes, as well as the ‘big questions.’ It was a time, after all, of big questions.”

The first edition of the feature was an interview of Donovan, was conducted independently before Rolling Stone was founded and bought from the writer, John Carpenter, who was listed as Stone’s “LA correspondent.” Carpenter says, “I hate to ask you this, but what comes first, the song or the words?” Donovan’s reply, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” was not rude, but it did show that he thought the question was inane. Carpenter responds, “I was asked to ask you that,” and quickly moves on to another subject. He was embarrassed by the question and quickly denied responsibility for it, and the exchange shows both his and Donovan’s dissatisfaction with the expected way of doing things. That Rolling Stone printed this exchange tells more about its unconventional approach to interviews than it does about Donovan, and it must have been included for this reason. It was a signal that the approach featured in Rolling Stone would be unorthodox.

The magazine’s first interview with Bob Dylan, published in 1967, was just a transcript of his 1965 San Francisco press conference, which came to symbolize his antagonistic relationship to the straight press. He played a cat and mouse game with reporters, displaying a confrontational attitude:

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78 Ibid.

Mr. Dylan you call yourself a completely disconnected person. No, I didn’t call myself that. They sort of drove those words in my mouth. I saw that paper.

How would you describe yourself? Have you analyzed…
I certainly haven’t. No.  

In contrast, when Dylan was interviewed specifically for *Rolling Stone*, by Jann Wenner in 1969, his tone was completely different. Wenner had been courting him for over a year, sending sample questions and topics, so Dylan knew what to expect upon agreeing to the interview. The tone of the piece is much more relaxed than in previous Dylan interviews. Dylan’s responses were still elusive, as was his habit, but were not nearly as antagonistic as in the press conferences that had made up the bulk of interviews with him up to this time.

Dylan was more forthcoming as well, offering glimpses into his life in a way that, at times, feels like he is speaking to a friend.

*Why haven’t you worked in so long?*
Well, uh…I do work.

*I mean on the road.*
On the road…I don’t know, working on the road…Well, Jann, I’ll tell ya – I was on the road for almost five years. It wore me down. I was on drugs, a lot of things. A lot of things just to keep going, you know? And I don’t want to live that way anymore. And uh…I’m just waiting for a better time—you know what I mean?  


81 Ibid.
In contrast to other interviews where Dylan shut down the interviewers, he opened up to Wenner. As seen in the previous chapters, Dylan had a habit of making fools of reporters with traditional, pedestrian questions, or as Goldstein called them, the “what’s your favorite color” types. In referring to drugs and asking “you know” and “you know what I mean,” Dylan showed that he was relating to Wenner on a different level than he related to members of the mainstream media. Wenner was not only a young, hip person like Dylan, he was also a fan, as he made clear during his eighteen-month long effort to secure the interview. Wenner’s questions displayed a thorough knowledge of Dylan’s career, and he asked none of the mundane questions that Dylan responded so negatively to.

Heightening the personal feeling of the piece was Wenner’s editorial direction. He wrote,

Rather than edit the interview into tight chunks and long answers, I asked Sheryl to transcribe the tapes with all the pauses, asides and laughs left in. So, much of the time, it's not what is said, but how it is said, and I think you will dig it more just as it went down.\(^\text{82}\)

The effect of this choice was to make the reader feel as though they were observing a conversation between a relaxed Dylan and a knowledgeable fan, a sea change from the Dylan who had come across in previous interviews. This was a kinder, gentler Dylan, one who opened up rather than shutting down when asked about his work.

Though the Dylan interviews were an important milestone in the shift to a more responsive rock press, the *Rolling Stone* interviews with John Lennon were

where the magazine made its name. Two early interviews with John Lennon were interesting because they seemed very intimate and candid. They “demolished the sanctity of the Beatles,” which was part of a broader cultural movement toward more honest, humanistic views of music stars.83

The first Lennon interview, conducted by Jonathan Cott in November of 1968, was conducted in Lennon’s flat with Yoko Ono in attendance. In this setting, which was much more intimate than the typical press conference, Lennon came across as genuine and honest. The effect was again heightened by certain editorial decisions, such as the phonetic spelling of certain of Lennon’s words, like using “me” rather than “my” to convey his accent. In the introduction to the piece, Cott writes, “It’s impossible to recapture in print John’s inflections and pronunciations of words like ‘happens,’ for example. Wish you had been there.”84 The personalizing effect of these elements of the story made the impact of its content more powerful.

The Beatles’ songs meant so much to young people across the country that the opportunity to ask Lennon about the meanings to his songs and receive thoughtful answers was potentially very powerful. In answering such questions, Lennon helped demystify some of the hype surrounding the Beatles:

_How much do you think the songs go towards building up a myth of a state of mind?_

I don't know. I mean we got a bit pretentious. Like everybody we had our phase and now it's a little change over to trying to be more natural, less


"newspaper taxis," say. I mean we're just changing. I don't know what we're doing at all, I just write them. Pop analysts are often trying to read something into songs that isn't there.\textsuperscript{85}

Admitting that his songs were less meaningful than some people made them out to be and that the Beatles were “a bit pretentious” brought them down to earth at a time when their words were being taken as gospel by many young people. To people hung up on the myth of the Beatles, Lennon had a message, “I mean they've got to see it someday – it's only me.”\textsuperscript{86}

Creating a sense of intimacy in their articles was an essential part of the new dynamic between \textit{Stone’s} writers and their subjects, as well as with their readers. A 1970 feature naming John Lennon as the magazine’s man of the year was touted on the cover as “A Private Talk with John.” Written by Ritchie Yorke, it was positioned by the title as very personal and intimate look at Lennon’s personal life and travails, an illusion that conveyed the sense that \textit{Rolling Stone} was indispensable in their role as the intermediary who made such a connection the artist possible. In reality, Lennon had just completed his bed-in tour with Yoko, inviting cameras and reporters into his bedroom to attract interest in his anti-war campaign. The \textit{Rolling Stone} article was just one of dozens to come out of the press tour. It featured milquetoast questions like, “If I just mentioned the Sixties, what sort of things come to mind?” and “When you are about to record a new Beatles album, do you feel very excited

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
about it?"87 The responses were equally lackluster. For example, in response to the
questions about the Sixties, Lennon said, “I don't think in terms of that. The Sixties I
suppose was, I dunno, my early twenties for me, and the Fifties were the good old
days, your teenage days. That's what they are to me personally. I don't think much
about it; I don't think about this or that decade until people start asking me.”88 His
response was not reluctant or obfuscated but nor was it interesting or enlightening.
Labeling it a “private talk with John” was simply a marketing ploy, an effort to sell
readers on the idea that Rolling Stone was the place to go for an inside line on the
thoughts and feelings of rock stars. Even when the magazine failed to deliver, it
wanted to convey the message that it was the source to find authentic connections
with musicians.

In 1971, Rolling Stone secured another interview with Lennon, which this
time was conducted by Jann Wenner. In contrast to the previous Lennon interview,
this one was personal and intimate. Wenner was a master of such interviews, not
only asking better questions but getting better responses than most other rock
writers. In what one journal called, “Arguably the most legendary interview ever
conducted with a major celebrity,”89 Lennon’s candid responses to Wenner’s
searching, often intensely personal questions exploded the myths surrounding the

87 Ritchie Yorke, “A Private Talk with John Lennon,” Rolling Stone, June
28, 1970.

88 Ibid.

89 Jann Wenner and John Lennon, Lennon Remembers, New York: Verso,
1971, 154.
most iconic band in rock history, and showed his skill and talent at interviewing. Part of his aptitude came from his comprehensive knowledge of the band, as when he asked, “[A]lways the Beatles were talked about – and the Beatles talked about themselves—as being four parts of the same person. What’s happened to those four parts?”

To humanize the group and to individuate himself, Lennon replied, “They remembered that they were four individuals. You see, we believed the Beatles myth, too. I don’t know whether the others still believe it.” The united front the Beatles had put up throughout their careers was shattered as Lennon answered candid questions about his feelings toward his band mates and his relationships with them. The questions Wenner asked spanned the Beatles’ career, demonstrating a thorough understanding of their history. As he responded, Lennon was candid and emotional.

At one point in the exchange, the questions seemed to be too much for him:

To go back to Apple and the breakup of the Beatles, Brian died, and one thing and another...
I didn’t really want to talk about all this... go on.

Do you mind?
Well, we’re halfway through it now, so let’s do it.

This reaction increased the sense that Wenner was getting at genuine, deep feelings, in his interview.


91 Ibid.
Demystifying the most celebrated band of all time had dual effects: it made them seem less perfect and thereby more relatable and also conveyed the sense that *Rolling Stone* had succeeded in getting a better hold on the reality of the band than anyone else had managed. One review of these interviews asserted, “This is the only voice that will ever articulate what it was really, really like to be in the Beatles when it all went wrong—caught in a moment, rasping, raving, and flaming mad.”\(^92\) The interviews’ ability to capture these moments makes them useful primary sources. Accordingly, “Music researchers still rely on well-thumbed copies of 60s and 70s *Rolling Stone* interviews; rarely has rock journalism been bettered.”\(^93\)

As the magazine became increasingly influential among young people in America, it began to broaden its approach to include more cultural reporting outside of the rock genre. According to Draper, “By 1969, when the magazine’s circulation reached 100,000, readership surveys indicated that for many readers it was the sole source of information on matters of interest to the youth culture.”\(^94\) With its growing influence, some members of the magazine’s staff encouraged *Rolling Stone* to devote more space to political issues.

In the Sixties, *Rolling Stone* featured only one non-musical cover story, about the war in Vietnam. The contents of the magazine were occasionally political, with an emphasis on countercultural issues like the underground or drug use, but for the

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94 Draper, 94.
large part they “generally steered clear, at Wenner’s insistence, of radical politics.”  

However there was a pushback from Rolling Stone’s writers who wanted to engage more deeply in political issues. Louis Menand writes, “‘Get back,’ Wenner pleaded with his editors in 1970, after the shootings at Kent State inspired them to try to ‘detrivialize’ the magazine, ‘get back to where you once belonged.’” That Wenner did not see the magazine as having a role in the political side of the counterculture differed from many of the magazine’s staff, who saw politics as inextricably linked to the whole countercultural project. Menand says, “the people who produced Wenner’s magazine took the ‘60s much more seriously than Wenner did.”

Despite Wenner’s reticence, the publication began to address more mainstream politics in the early 1970s, with a liberal (but not radical) bent. As Rolling Stone entered its gonzo phase with the arrival of Hunter S. Thompson on the scene in 1970, some of its best writing began to be political, not musical. It featured stories about the growing religious right, Watergate, the Black Panther Party, and other issues that were well outside of questions of rock and roll. Tom Wolfe’s fantastic work on the space program that would become The Right Stuff was printed in the magazine in several parts, and Hunter S. Thompson began his Fear and Loathing series there, works that proved highly influential. Wading into general

95 Menand, “Life in the Stone Age.”

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.
elections, the magazine even endorsed some candidates. With eighteen-year-olds gaining the right to vote in 1972, Thompson’s coverage of the McGovern campaign was only a part of the magazine’s efforts to secure his election. By 1974, nine out of twenty-four covers features were non-musical, with six of the nine devoted to political stories. Throughout the seventies, Wenner made a serious impact on national politics, feting major political figures like Jimmy Carter in real life and the pages of his magazine.

In addition to this enlargement of their scope, *Rolling Stone* began expanding their coverage of pop culture in other areas, like film, television, comedy, and literature. This signaled a shift in the role that *Rolling Stone* wanted to play in the lives of its readers. They wanted to be a one-stop shop for baby boomers, the cultural touchstone for a generation, serving an array of interests. Meanwhile, “long-time critics bemoaned an increasingly perfunctory coverage of rock…but the flaccid state of music in the 70s did little to inspire strong journalism.”98 As revenues from advertisers within the music industry grew larger, *Rolling Stone* became ever more reluctant to go out on a limb and champion new music. There was little profit in breaking new artists. Established artists were often given a soft touch, as seen in the case of Lester Bangs and Canned Heat.

In 1977, *Rolling Stone* moved their offices from San Francisco to New York, which “provided the final break with the past and while Wenner’s brainchild had

98 Ibid.
long-since achieved a respectability, *Rolling Stone* had become merely a cipher rather than a kernel.¹⁹⁹ In the years since, *Rolling Stone* has tried, insofar as is possible, to curate the history of the magazine themselves. Numerous collections of its interviews and articles have been released, each edited in house and introduced with glowing praise for the magazine and its accomplishments. Historians, overall, have been less kind to the magazine. For some, it represents the betrayal of the hippie culture at the hands of one of its own. It is, according to these critics, perhaps the best example of the co-optation of countercultural ideals in the service of profit and the music industry.

The truth is less black and white than either of these viewpoints, as is usually the case. *Rolling Stone* helped to popularize rock criticism in a major way, and it helped to bring it into the mainstream of American culture. Its “Interview” feature constitutes an important body of work in the literature of rock and roll, and they were highly influential in changing the way musical artists were approached and interviewed. *Rolling Stone* also became increasingly influential in liberal politics over the course of time, if never living up to the radical ideals its countercultural origins would suggest.

For some, *Rolling Stone* represents the discarded ideals of the hippie generation, while for others it symbolizes the successful incorporation of the counterculture into the mainstream. It mirrored the shifts occurring within the music

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field itself. As the Sixties ended, large corporations finally made inroads into monetizing the genre more successfully than ever before. As a mediator between these interests and their audience, *Rolling Stone* became extremely wealthy. Protecting his investment and influence became more important to Wenner than staying on the cutting edge of rock music. According to Draper, *Rolling Stone* became “respected but no longer relied upon, a force among other forces—an institution, surely, and like many institutions, is disregarded.”

In these ways, *Rolling Stone* was not only a product of the Sixties, but a symbol of the clash between the counterculture’s ideals and the realities of market influences. The magazine gave a larger platform than ever before to rock writers and sped the movement of serious writing about pop from the fringes to the center of American culture. In the process, some of the quintessential qualities of counterculture—from its emphasis on transparency to its anti-capitalistic attitudes—were lost. Though *Rolling Stone* was a major touchstone of Sixties rock culture, its reticence to engage fully with the major issues of the time as well as the undue influence of Wenner’s sycophantic personality on its content made it a poor representation of the era’s serious rock criticism. Nonetheless, for many, it has become the standard bearer of the genre.

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Rock criticism was invented only a year before *Rolling Stone* was created, but it had already developed distinct stylistic and philosophical conventions. *Rolling Stone* adopted many of these as they employed a number of influential early rock critics. They also left some of these standards behind, particularly the political commitments that marked the work of critics like Ellen Willis and Richard Goldstein. Wenner’s commitment to the counterculture were superficial. This was apparent in his approach to rock. To him, the counterculture was merely a source of income. The magazine captured an enormous audience, much larger than any rock criticism had ever had. It made rock criticism more mainstream than ever. It also robbed it of much of the rebellious spirit that made it so important to its fans.

As with the institutionalization of any artistic form, there was soon a backlash against *Rolling Stone* and its particular brand of rock criticism. Meanwhile, rock’s commercial success created its own backlash within the genre. Feeling that rock culture was becoming increasingly standardized and commercialized, rock performers and critics broke with the mainstream, creating their own subcultures within the larger rock world. These subdivisions of rock into genres like punk, metal, and prog rock was mirrored by a fragmentation in the rock criticism profession.

Young critics like Lester Bangs entered the field as these changes took place, and the outcome was the shift of writers into increasingly narrow musical specializations. Just as rock ceased to be a cohesive whole, so did its criticism. This fragmentation would mark the end of the first period of rock criticism, in which rock music was treated by its critics as a more or less cohesive whole.
After the success of *Rolling Stone*, rock criticism would be less about convincing the public that the genre was valuable art than defining and delineating what made it so. This included defending the genre against the adulterations caused by commercialism and encouraging a return to its expressive roots. Lester Bangs shepherded in a new era of rock writing that challenged the complacency of rock and roll fans.
Chapter Six: Lester Bangs

Lester Bangs is the best-known critic to come out of the rock era, renowned in his own time and remembered long after. Bangs was the last of the great rock critics, chronicling the dissolution of the genre into different subgenres and scenes in the 1970s. He was the most important critic of the second generation of rock writers. He championed both punk and heavy metal in their earliest days, and his writing and personality shaped the discourse around the music he reported on. Bangs positioned himself as a guardian of rock’s authenticity because, in his perception, corporate influence and artistic snobbery threatened the integrity of the form. He held music to a rigorously high standard and was quick to point out any hypocrisy or shortcomings in the direction music was taking.

His style mirrored the language of rock, embodying the subject he wrote about. So did his attitude, which was rebellious and immoderate. He was a heavy drug user, which came through in his writing style. His use of amphetamines and other drugs combined with his naturally obsessive personality to make him incredibly prolific. He wrote tens of thousands of pages in the thirteen years between when his career began and when he died of a drug overdose at thirty-three.

He is the only rock critic to be biographed and has had two collections of his work published to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Most visibly, he was immortalized by Phillip Seymour Hoffman in the Academy Award-winning 2001 film Almost Famous, making his name familiar to many who had never read his
work. The film’s story was based in part on Bangs’ interviews with a seventeen-year-old aspiring rock critic, Cameron Crowe.

His rock and roll lifestyle came through strongly in his work because he used a Gonzo style of writing that made him the central character in his pieces. As an offshoot of the New Journalism, Gonzo eschewed objectivity and encouraged novelistic writing. It differed from New Journalism in making the riotous, often drug-fueled escapades of its authors the centerpieces of their stories. Further injecting his rock and roll lifestyle into his writing, he created a style he called a “trash aesthetic.” He championed raw, gritty, and offensive music, and his writing displayed these qualities as well. As a member of a group of writers called the “Noise Boys,” he injected rock writing with a more raucous, experimental, punk style than it ever had before.

His stylistic choices were a product of his philosophy about rock and roll. He believed that rock should connect to the lonely, dark side of the human experience as much as the beautiful, loving side. This perspective was partly a result of his own personal experiences. He had had a difficult life, and the 1970s were a dark time. Recession and the urban crisis hit hard, and this was particularly true in Detroit, where Bangs spent the most influential part of his career. The Detroit-based magazine Bangs edited, Creem, reflected the worsening fortunes of the city and country around it. It championed harder-edged music like punk and metal, acting as an important vehicle for these genres as they developed over the 1970s.
Bangs believed that the vitality of these styles represented a shift away from a focus on musical proficiency, which he believed stifled rock. Central to his conception of rock was that rock should be accessible to anyone who wanted to play it. Equally alarming to Bangs as the professionalization of rock music was its commercialization. He wanted to return the music’s focus to its origins as a grassroots form and away from the slick, stadium rock it had become.

His aesthetic values reflected his philosophy and worldview. He appreciated music that featured “gross, ugly, idiotic juxtapositions of the totally incongruous… life, spontaneity, joy, rage, or any kind of authentic passion or conviction.” Bangs found many of these qualities in amateurs or in bands that had an amateur aesthetic. He championed new groups that were unspoiled by the homogenizing effects of the music industry. He felt that it was in imperfection that an artist’s humanity was best expressed, not through self-conscious, perfectly executed music.

His opposition to “arty” music was more of an ethic than a reflection of Bangs’ taste; he liked plenty of artistic music, but he was opposed to it in theory. He thought that an emphasis on technique and skill interfered with raw emotional expression, which he believed was rock’s most important quality. For this reason, he promoted punk, the genre he is most closely associated with.

From protopunk to the early days of postpunk and in between, Bangs helped to define the genre as it developed. Punk spoke to the part of Bangs that felt like a

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perpetual outsider, and by championing punk musicians and other outsiders, Bangs hoped to restore to rock to its origins as music for the alienated and disaffected.

His approach to writing included a large amount of hyperbole. He tended to make grand pronouncements with an almost religious passion, although his mercurial personality meant that these convictions could change at the drop of a hat (or, more likely, at the end of a high). If he liked a band, he would do things like declare them “Gods,” or say that they were the best band alive. His hyperbolism was enough to soften the impact of such declarations. But, if he loved a band, he was capable of writing rapturous, transcendent reviews that were themselves works of art.

More frequently, though, his talents were devoted to pans. His many negative reviews were sarcastic, rude, vulgar, cruel, crude, and often extremely funny and engaging. He held nothing back, even if he idolized the subject of his writing. His attitude toward celebrities in person was more fawning than he would care to admit, but he often treated them critically, even harshly, in his writing.

He was not a particularly political writer, nor a particularly political person for that matter, but as his career advanced, he began to engage more with social issues of the era. Over time, he felt a greater sense of responsibility to his audience, even as that audience changed as he aged. He attempted to impose a sense of morality and ethics on the anarchistic punk community. Most significantly, he encouraged them to rethink their offensive racist and sexist attitudes.
He was the main force in each of his pieces, laying himself bare in every review. His wounds were on display as much as his pleasure or his anger. His connection to rock music was visceral and the central theme of each of his pieces was what rock meant to him and how it moved in his life.

His personal background had a strong influence on the way he ultimately thought and wrote. Leslie “Lester” Conway Bangs was born on December 13, 1948 in Escondido, California. His father was Conway Leslie Bangs, an ex-con who had spent ten years in prison for burglary and assault. He became a dump-truck driver and married a woman, Norma Catching, who was in many ways his opposite. She was nine years older than Conway and an ardent Jehovah’s Witness, a passive and stoic woman. Together they had Lester Conway Bangs. He was the only child of Norma and Conway, a decade younger than his half-sisters and brother. Bangs’ family lived in a relatively isolated, enmeshed fashion with a family group consisting of cousins who married each other. He had a closed family tree, with his parents both coming from the same grandparents. A mixture of Conway’s alcoholism, poverty, and Norma’s strict religious zealotry made for a highly dysfunctional atmosphere in his early youth. It was tempered somewhat by Norma’s constancy and both parents’ apparent adoration for Lester, but it left its mark on his psyche.

From an early age, Bangs was noticeably precocious. He was an early reader and upon entering school, his teachers encouraged his mother to skip him ahead two grades. She refused. To her, education was only valuable insofar as it taught a child
to read the *Bible*; beyond that, she did not have much use for it. Bangs was not allowed to join after-school programs either, which Norma saw as a secular distraction from spiritual pursuits. Norma would rather have him accompany her as she proselytized door-to-door or passed out religious literature.

A surviving photo of Bangs with his mother shows him standing in downtown San Diego as a young child, wearing a placard that read, “WHAT IS YOUR DESTINY?” He would put the photo on the cover of a punk album he made years later, indicating that his early experiences were an obsession for Bangs throughout his life. He would later somewhat jokingly connect his zealotry about music and convincing others of its merits to his experiences trying to convert people to his mother’s religion.²

When Bangs was eight years old, his father, Conway, died in a house fire. Though the cause was never officially determined, those close to him assumed that Conway had passed out drunk with a lit cigarette. Bangs was very attached to his dad. He was aware of his dad’s alcohol problem, even if he was too young to understand it. The death of his father, particularly in such a tragic fashion, would trouble Bangs throughout his life. His mother’s reaction to it—a stoic, fatalistic calm based in her religious beliefs—bothered him as well. He felt alone as he grieved.

Because of his father’s imprisonment, intemperate lifestyle, and early death, tragedy loomed large in Bangs’ life. A high school friend said, “There was

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something wrong about the Bangs’ family history, a suffocating, almost Faulknerian atmosphere whose cause I hesitate to name.”³ Bangs seemed in some ways to embrace his tragic past. He wrote, “Actually I’m kind of proud of this dark, distorted childhood mythology. Looks good on a literary figure.”⁴ In many ways, he lived up to his worries that he would turn out like his father, battling substance abuse for most of his life before his early death due to a drug overdose.

After his father died, he and his mother moved to a small apartment in El Cajon, a suburb of San Diego. There, his isolation increased. According to a school friend, “His mother was a recluse, an unhappy woman who clung to her Jehovah’s Witness church as if it were a lifeline over an abyss.”⁵ His desire to feed his mind set him against his mother’s beliefs from an early age. Even something as innocent as his Classics Illustrated collection was, according to Bangs,

subject to stringent, arbitrary and rather sudden swoops of censorship. Things like The War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells and From the Earth to the Moon by Jules Verne, my literary mentor of the third grade, would suddenly appear in ripped piles atop the ashes when I’d go out to empty the trash into the incinerator on a winter morning. My mother thought science fiction was demented nonsense; all the Witnesses do.⁶ Whether it was despite his cultural deprivation or because of it, Bangs developed an unquenchable thirst for music and literature that would be a hallmark of the rest of


⁴ DeRogatis, 19.

⁵ Houghton, “My High School Days with Lester Bangs.”

⁶ Jim DeRogatis, 19.
his life. DeRogatis writes that “most of Lester’s closest confidantes” believe that “the death of his father, his relationship with his mother, and the feelings of guilt and impending doom bestowed by the Jehovah’s Witnesses were the most potent sources of pain in his life.”

Meanwhile, Norma’s new role as a single mother meant that she worked late hours as a waitress to support the family. Her absence allowed Bangs time for other pursuits, especially listening to records that he managed to wheedle, buy, or steal. Because his siblings were so much older than him, the closest person to Bangs’ age in his family was his nephew, Ben Catching III. Ben was three years older than his uncle, but he joined Bangs as they explored culture in their early days. Ben was his best friend and his lifelong supporter. He understood and appreciated Bangs’ mind. Bangs, in turn, called him “my eternal critic.” It was with Catching that Bangs began his first musical obsession: jazz. Bangs argued passionately about the form to his young teen friends, most of whom had little idea of what he was talking about. Together, although he and Ben “scoffed at the stodginess of Down Beat…they read every issue religiously.”

His favorite jazz musician was originally Miles Davis, but soon he became a die-hard Charles Mingus fan. This shift is emblematic of the course of Bangs’ musical tastes throughout his career. Davis was less wild than Mingus, more

7 Ibid.
9 DeRogatis, 20.
polished. He loved both artists, but to him, Mingus was more rebellious and expressive than Davis, caring less about having his music be relatable to his audience than having an outlet for his feelings.\textsuperscript{10} It was emotional honesty that resonated with Bangs, and the rawer and less restrained it was, the better.

Ben Catching said, “I had other interests…but music and reading were everything for him.”\textsuperscript{11} Bangs later said, “Mingus and Kerouac, those were my saints.”\textsuperscript{12} The Beat poets displayed the same qualities that Bangs liked in jazz, the raw, powerful expression of human emotion. Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg weren’t just authors to Bangs; they were lifestyle models. According to DeRogatis, “Following the model of the beats, he turned his outsider status from a liability to an asset—or at least a persona.”\textsuperscript{13} He stole from record stores, shunned his mother’s strict rules, and tried taking everything from nutmeg to seasickness pills to get high.

In school, writes DeRogatis, “Though he was bright and talented, Lester alienated many of his teachers with a blatant disdain for authority.”\textsuperscript{14} One of the subjects he excelled at was speech, and his teacher wrote in his yearbook, “You are


\textsuperscript{11} Derogatis, 20

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 22.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 23.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
most likely the best speech student this school has had. You are also the most erratic, unorthodox, non-conforming person this school has had.”

Lester had always been a good talker, particularly when it came to things he was passionate about. As a young teen, he would give excited lectures to his friends about the virtues of the music he liked, speeches that were often met with bewildered looks by his audiences. However, these rants contained effective arguments, according to his friends, and they convinced some of them to give jazz, and later rock and roll, a chance.

He was totally fanatical about the music he liked. One high school friend remembered, “There’s something unself-conscious about Bangs’ embrace of rock. As though he just knew, for sure, that it was the best music.” His relationship with rock was organic and personal. For Bangs, culture was like a religion. A school friend remembers that when Bangs was asked if he believed in God, “he said that he believed in other things like travel and poetry and music.”

Bangs’ favorite music was always changing, a result of his voracious listening and constant ruminations. One consistent characteristics of Bangs’ taste was his embrace of the rougher, wilder side of music and his disdain for artsy rock. Bangs loved the raw, anarchistic sound of early rock and roll, and would eventually


16 Ibid.
to champion edgy sounds like punk, heavy metal, and new wave music. This shift was fundamental to Bangs’ later influence on rock criticism. It came about when he was just beginning to write about the music seriously. According to his school friend, Gary Rachac,

Lester ascribed to a lot of ideas that later he was in complete opposition to. In ’66 and ’67 he wanted rock’n'roll to be “art.” He didn’t want rock’n'roll to be inarticulate and stupid. He found all that to be anathema and he was a real snob in a lot of ways. The thing is, no one was really talking like that at that point. It had just gotten started so it wasn’t like he was falling in line with anybody else’s ideas. He wanted stuff to be artistic and sensitive and well-worked out and all this other stuff. He just gradually came around to where his views were the opposite of where they’d started out. And then, of course, he was the sworn enemy of everything artistic in rock’n'roll.17

Bangs viewed artiness as artificiality from an early age. He identified with the emotions in rock and thought the refinement that came with art rock interfered with authentic expression. He preferred a “hard crude sound” to a smoothly-produced sound. He didn’t value originality as much as expression. Moreover, he was not afraid to change his mind about rock and roll. He was constantly wrangling with what rock and roll meant to him and what he wanted from it.

When Bangs’ writing career began at age twenty, he was living at home with his mother, working as a shoe salesman, and attending a community college part-time. He wanted to be a writer. Since high school, he’d imagined himself as a novelist, and he never totally shook the dream. He had written a “Sounds of the Scene” column for his school paper, the El Cajon Valley High School Smoke Signal,

17 Ibid.
but he wanted to write fiction or poetry. His dream was to be the next William S. Burroughs, novelizing his own experiences, especially his experimentation with drugs.

By age 20, Bangs had become a regular drug user. When he was unable to get his hands on alcohol or pills, Bangs had the peculiar, and ultimately deadly, habit of ingesting massive amounts of cold and cough medicine. Romilar, an over-the-counter cough syrup with psychedelic effects when taken in large doses, was his favorite. He would drink it despite the purgatives that were added to discourage its abuse. According to Bangs, when he was on Romilar he became “a creep who couldn’t do anything but stumble up to people and bellow ‘HAW! HAW! HAW!’ in their faces like a wacked-out Aborigine.”18 As much as for his talent and passion for music, Bangs was remembered by those who knew him for his outrageous drug habit.

For Bangs, like so many others, the late Sixties were difficult for both personal and political reasons. The promises of the Sixties, which had been crumbling since the traumas of 1968, hit rock music fans hard. For many of the form’s most ardent supporters—including Richard Goldstein and Ellen Willis—the unraveling of the political hopes meant an end to their belief in the transformative power of the music. Bangs was just slightly younger than his predecessors, but in the rapidly changing culture of the Sixties, this meant he was a world away from the

18 DeRogatis, 38.
hopeful atmosphere that existed just a few years before. He recalled, “[T]he fall of
1968 was such a terrible time: I was a physical and mental wreck, nerves shredded
and ghosts and spiders looming and squatting across the mind.”¹⁹

He remembered the year as “a time when a lot of things that a lot of people
cared about passionately began to disintegrate, and when the self-destructive
undertow that always accompanied the great Sixties party had an awful lot of ankles
firmly in its maw and was pulling straight down.”²⁰ The day after Bobby Kennedy’s
assassination he wrote, “last nite was something in the way of a final straw for me. I
can see great storms coming, but at this point I’ve given up hope on finding any sort
of even temporarily pacifying solution.”²¹ Unlike Goldstein, Willis, and even
Wenner to a certain extent, Bangs never held the idealistic worldview that was
prevalent in the heady days of the mid-Sixties. According to Steve Jones in “Pop
Music and the Press,”

What is conspicuously absent from Bangs’s writing is the inherent sense of
optimism that suffused popular-music criticism. Gleason and Hentoff, for
instance, did not so much champion popular music as voice their faith in it as
a force for positive social change. They were not convinced that popular
music would end racism, but they did seem to believe that popular music
would bring it to a swifter conclusion among youth. In Bangs’s writing, such

²⁰ Ibid.
faith is present but far from certain, and it is a marker of change in popular music and the popular music audience.  22

Not only was his personality different—darker than many of his fellow critics—but he was also the product of a different time. Beginning his career in 1968 and reaching the peak of his influence in the mid-1970s, Bangs straddled two generations of rock critics. He had one foot in the first wave of rock critics, for whom rock music was intimately tied to the social and cultural upheavals of the sixties. The other foot was in the less optimistic, less cohesive rock scene of the 1970s, and his career symbolized the shift between the two. His attitude was toward rock was contrarian, his philosophy about music was unconventional, and his style reflected his rejection of the status quo.

There were many qualities that defined his style, which was distinctive from his very first piece. Rock’s aesthetics were reflected in his writing, which captured all the personality, contradictions, and chaotic energy of the genre. He sometimes wrote in a drug-fueled frenzy and sometimes he was more controlled, but he was always passionate. His work was full of bravado, swagger, and defiance, punctuated by tender moments of honesty and piercing sincerity. He was often vulgar, but just as often poetic, and sometimes he managed to be both at once. His writing was always engaging, as if Bangs was talking excitedly about his records with friends back in high school.

Stylistically, Bangs’ tended to write like rock 'n' roll sounds. When writing for *Rolling Stone* about Captain Beefheart, whose music featured lyrics that Bangs described as “a wild and totally original form of free-associational poetry,” his writing reflected his subject,

They’ve both just washed down the last of the scalding chilli fulla big eyed beans from Venus what glare atcha accusingly as ya poppem doomward inya mouf. The Captain, Van Vliet, call him which you choose, has chosen to live out here, squatflat wampum on this blazened barren ground for many a year. Don’t see too much o’ the hoomin side o’ the varmint family out here, but that’s fine with Cap Vliet, “Doc” as he’s called by the acrusty prospectors hung on lak chiggers from times before his emigration to this spot.

After this passage, Bangs segued directly into a straightforward analysis of the music, minus the patter. But the use of such language captured Captain Beefheart’s strange and free-wheeling lyrical sensibility. It effectively conveyed the singular weirdness of Beefheart’s sound by mimicking it.

When writing about the Troggs, the garage band famous for “Wild Thing,” Bangs again adopts a patois aimed at replicating rock lingo:

All right, punk. This is it. Choose ya out. We’re gonna settle this right here. You can talk about yer MC5 and yer Stooges and even yer Grand Funk and Led Zep, yep, alla them badasses’ve carved out a hunka turf in this town, but I tell you there was once a gang that was so bitchin’ *bad* that they woulda cut them dudes down to snotnose crybabies and in less than three minutes too…Course I know some a yez wasn’t quite outa yer mama’s parlors an’ into the street yet in 1966.

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24 Ibid.

“Bitchin’ bad” is the vibe that Bangs was going for in his own writing here, again mirroring the speech and attitude of his subject.

He embodied the rock and roll lifestyle, and that was apparent in more than just his use of the lingo. The connection between drugs and the rock and roll scene began in the late 1960s and accelerated in the 1970s. Bangs’ drug abuse had an enormous impact on the work he produced, both in style and in sheer volume. Bangs would write over 50,000 pages of text during his short life. Robert Christgau guesses at his output, saying “three million words may be a conservative estimate.”

Sometimes Bangs would bang out half a dozen record reviews in a single drug-fueled night.

It was due in part to this prolific output that he secured his first writing job. When Rolling Stone began in 1967, it ran an advertisement asking for young writers to submit their record reviews to the magazine. Bangs responded by sending piece after piece throughout 1967 and 1968, many of which he wrote during benders, sitting for hours with his typewriter on his bed, typing furiously.

The drugs must be accounted for in to understand Bangs’ body of work. They influenced not just his style, but his content, affecting his reactions to the music he criticized. It also helped, along with his outrageous language and unconventional tastes, to limit his effects on mainstream rock audiences. He was not relatable like Goldstein was, and he certainly was not as refined as Ellen Willis. Whereas both of

these writers had success in the mainstream, Bangs struggled to find his place in the rock culture.

Sometimes, in addition to alienating potential audiences, his drug use hurt his critical authority, as when he published a rave review of Black Oak Arkansas in *Rolling Stone* that he wrote on speed. He later admitted,

When Black Oak Arkansas’s first album was released, I made the mistake of listening to it one time and writing a fulsomely imagistic review while under the influence of amphetamines, praising it to the skies…By the time this album came out, however, I had become so sick of this wimp dubbed Dandy’s growly pullulations that I could hardly stand to listen to it and only half-jokingly suggested to somebody that “I wish somebody would shoot that fuckin’ lead singer in that group.”

The emotional volatility his drug use precipitated became a characteristic aspect of his work, and he was unapologetic about it. Bangs did not feel that there was anything wrong with being brash and crude; to him, that was the rock and roll spirit. This was part of the style that Bangs was known for, which he called the “trash aesthetic.”

For him and his colleagues like Nick Tosches and Richard Meltzer, sometimes called the “Noise Boys,”

[T]here were no rules, no money, and certainly no career opportunities, [so they] just ran wild, building on the stream-of-consciousness spew of the Beats, the literary aspirations of the New Journalists, and the general Me Decade permissiveness while trying to capture the gonzo energy of the music in their prose.


Working in Detroit during the early seventies, Bangs’ already dark view of the world was intensified. His ideas about music were very much a product of his place and time. The city was feeling the effects of the Urban Crisis and the increasingly pessimistic outlook of the Seventies. In employing a gritty, hard-edged aesthetic, Bangs reflected his historical and socio-economic milieux. This was more than just an aesthetic choice; Bangs believed that rock had become too polished and longed for a return to the accessibility and rawness of early rock and roll.

Much of the standardization and slickness that Bangs was rebelling against in his writing resulted from rock’s increasing commercialization. As the rock music market became one of the largest cultural sectors in the Seventies’ economy, music was being professionalized and homogenized as never before. John Covach writes,

As the stylistic range of rock music was expanding over the course of the [1970s], the business of rock music was also growing and transforming from a business owned and run by entertainment companies into a business owned and run by multinational corporations with little previous involvement in music. For some writers, the stylistic and corporate expansions are linked, such that one way of telling the story of rock in the 1970s is to cast it as a story of rock music in decline…According to this interpretation, most of what’s best about music in the late 1960s gets progressively corrupted by big money and even bigger egos, all motivated by the corporate bottom line, resulting in the much-despised corporate rock of the late 1970s, which is dismissed as a formulaic exploitation of rock designed only to make money—music that has sold its rock and roll soul. 29

The problem with rock, as Bangs perceived it, was that music was being restrained and neutered by its own success; in other words, that there was less experimentation and wildness in rock and roll as it became increasingly commercialized. The more

29 Covach, 305.
money that was on the line, the less likely record companies would be to support risky musical choices. By the time Bangs entered the field of rock criticism, corporations’ attempts to corner the rock and roll market had met with increasing success over the course of the Sixties.

By the early 1970s, rock was a moneymaker second only to Hollywood in yearly profits, worth more than nearly any other cultural form. Rock criticism was no longer about championing subculture or an embattled form. It was being taken seriously, thanks in part to the work of rock critics who came before, but also because it was a huge moneymaker.

Bangs went into his career at a point when the first generation of rock critics were dropping out, and he began it, rather than ended it, disillusioned. Thus, his attitude was different going in, and his approach reflected that. As the marginalized form became a cultural establishment in its own right, rock developed its own internal anti-establishmentarian in Bangs. Former Rolling Stone editor David Dalton explains,

One of Lester's advantages as a critic was that he came from the second generation of rock writers. He was a proto-punk, unencumbered by the pieties of the ‘60s and reverence for ‘60s idols who had become lumbering, pompous dinosaurs. By the early ‘70s, rock had effectively disconnected itself from social and political causes, and the music biz was awash in megabucks and hype (James Taylor, Peter Frampton and Slade were the

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avatars of the age). The time was ripe for Lester's savage puncturing of the pretentious, inflated hulks who bellowed across the land.\textsuperscript{31}

His job wasn’t to champion rock, but to revitalize it at a time when the free spirit of the form threatened to be stifled by commercialism and the weight its own success.

Bangs found the ideal outlet for his ideas in \textit{Creem} magazine. \textit{Creem} was founded in 1969 by rock fan Barry Kramer. It ran with the byline “America’s Only Rock and Roll Magazine,” a cheeky assertion that symbolized the magazine’s antagonistic attitude toward the mainstreaming of rock. \textit{Creem} championed a hard-edged aesthetic, suited to its home in gritty urban Detroit.

The music that the magazine focused on were products of the splintering of rock into multiple subgenres. The terms “punk” and “heavy metal” were coined in the magazine’s pages in 1971 to describe distinct styles of rock and roll. The magazine’s edgy approach suited Bangs’ taste, and he was hired in 1971, only two years after publishing his first rock review, to write about Alice Cooper for \textit{Creem}. The editor of \textit{Creem}, Dave Marsh, recognized that Bangs was something special. Marsh said, “He had the rawest writing talent I’d ever seen in a young writer.”\textsuperscript{32} Marsh soon asked him to come on board as an editor and Bangs agreed, moving to Detroit in 1971.


\textsuperscript{32} DeRogatis, 66.
In many ways, Creem was the anti-Rolling Stone, and self-consciously so. It was more about the music than the advertisers. Creem chronicler Michael J. Kramer writes, “The magazine never abandoned its engagement with popular music as a product in the consumer marketplace, but Creem did use its sense of being from Detroit to change its stance toward the counterculture.”

Detroit in the late-1960s and 1970s was a city hardened by political, social and economic crises. Creem’s response to their declining urban environment was cheeky insolence, a devil-may-care attitude that barely concealed a wounded hopelessness.

It was in Detroit that Bangs became legendary among hardcore rock fans. Creem’s circulation was only 130,000 in 1973, but its influence was great, particularly within the harder-edged demimonde that was branching off from rock.

According the Chicago Tribune,

[What made Creem work was a style, a way of looking at the world—disruptive, anarchistic, irreverent and past the point of vulgarity. The magazine celebrated a certain ethic: a humor and clubbiness bred of youth, drugs, music and a perverse delight in the incongruities of life...out of chaos came a magazine that, in its heyday in the early 70s, became a laboratory for rock and roll writing. It was a place where what you said mattered, but how you said it was even more important.”


34 DeRogatis, 100.

At *Creem*, Bangs perfected his gonzo style and “trash aesthetic,” supported by his editors, fans, and a community of similar writers.

He became immersed the hard-edged world of Detroit music, which suited his own dark and troubled personality. His philosophy on music reflected the aesthetics of the post-industrial North in decline, gritty, raw, and wounded. His appreciation for unconventional, edgy music led him to champion avant-garde music, despite his professed hatred of “arty” music. His goal was to push rock to a more visceral, authentic, and emotional place as it became increasingly standardized.

The noise approach rejected traditional standards of respectability and aesthetic values. But it went further than that and elevated the ugly, the gross, and the strange. For Bangs and his fellow Noise Boys, it was the underside of American life that they emotionally connected to. This was partly a result of Bangs’ own worldview. In his experience, life was full of disappointments, trauma, and self-doubt.

If rock and roll was to speak to Bangs, it would have to be in the language of the wounded and world-weary. Refined compositions did not appeal as much to him as the chaos of noise. Writing of the Count Five, a garage band whose song “Psychotic Reactions” lent its name to Bangs’ first collected works, Bangs said, “I finally came to realize that grossness was the truest criterion for rock ’n’ roll, the cruder the clang and grind the more fun and longer listened-to the album’d be.”

Acknowledging that he differed on this point from some critics whom he respected, he explained, “I dug certain outrageous brands of ineptitude.” Refinements in technique and even artistry were not necessarily good for the music in his view. He described them as “stylistic distortions” of what rock 'n' roll had once been.

Bangs’ taste and aesthetics reflected his philosophy about rock. Music that did not meet his very particular standards was subject to intense ire and ridicule from Bangs. He liked music that captured an amateur aesthetic, reflective of the garage music that had drawn him to rock and roll in his San Diego suburb. For him, emotional expression was necessary for him to connect with music, no matter its style. But he found that certain styles promoted more honest emotional connections than others, and those were the ones he liked best.

He often found that the more elaborate the orchestration and production, the more artifice was involved, and that this limited the potential for authentic emotional connection with the music. Therefore, he generally preferred rawer, less refined music, although, as mentioned, there were exceptions, like his affinity for the Avant-garde and the exceptional. He also liked for music to be hard and driving, which he thought reflected the wilder aesthetic of early rock music, which he felt was more authentic than the commercialized music of the 1970s. Gritty sounds and edgy content were part of Bangs’ interest in outsider music, whether it was experimental,

37 Ibid, 11.

avant-garde, or even extremely rudimentary. He thought that music should push the boundaries of creative expression. Standardization and slickness was the enemy of rock and roll; they interfered with the connection between artist and audience, which to Bangs was a cardinal sin.

He believed that the essence of rock and roll was in its raw emotional appeal. He wanted rock music to recapture the roughness and vitality of its early days at a time when commercialism and professionalization threatened the form’s visceral emotional connections with its audience. He thought that it was the expressive power of rock that was its most important quality, and he pushed hard for a return to what he felt were its more organic origins. He acted as a polemicist, making dramatic pronouncements about music, often contradicting himself, but with the goal of pushing music to the edges of what he viewed as an increasingly homogenized and impotent.

In his appreciation of amateurism, he often celebrated unknown or unpolished bands. As he explained in an essay called “How to Be a Rock Critic,”

You gotta find some band somewhere that’s maybe even got two or three albums out and might even be halfway good, but the important thing is the more arcane it is the better, it’s gotta be something that absolutely nobody in the world but you and two other people (the group’s manager and one member’s mother) knows or cares about, and what you wanna do is TALK ABOUT THIS BUNCH OF OBSCURE NONENTITIES AND THEIR RECORD(S) LIKE THEY’RE THE HOTTEST THING IN THE HISTORY OF MUSIC! You gotta build ’em up real big, they’re your babies, only you alone can perceive their true greatness, so you gotta go around telling everybody that they’re better than the Rolling Stones, they beat the Beatles black and blue, they murtelyze the Dead, they’re the most significant and
profound musical force in the world. And someday their true greatness will be recognized and you will be vindicated as a seer far ahead of your time.  

Though heavily saturated with his typical bombast, it effectively describes Bangs’ modus operandi.

By arguing against the new slickness in watered-down Seventies rock, he was pushing back against rock’s mainstreaming. Rock, he believed, should be a mode of expression available to everyone, not just auteurs with their expensive studio productions. He says of garage bands, “How do they sound? Perfect! They can't play a lick! But mainly they got the right attitude, which is all rock'n'roll's ever been about from day one. (I mean, not being able to play is never enough.)”  

If rock was a feeling, then conveying that feeling was the most important thing musicians could do. Musical proficiency was not a requirement.

In fact, talent could interfere with expression if showcasing it became more important to the artist than expression.

When I get really dour sometimes I wonder if it'd be possible at all to write a song today like, oh, say, ‘Wild Thing.’ People are just too superconscious of every creative move made in their lives of infinite possibilities and friendly niceness to do anything anymore that's … just a simple expression of something with no real ramifications, at least none that the creator consciously put there: if some clown like me wants to come along and tell you that 'Wild Thing' is the supreme manifestation of Rock and Roll as Global Worldmind Orgasm plus Antespurt to the Millennium, you have the privilege of laughing in his face and telling him to shut up and go back to his orgone box. But if the writer of "Wild Thing" had actually had any

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39 Lester Bangs, “How to be a Rock Critic.”

considerations in mind even remotely related to that kind of stuff when he sat down and made it up, you can bet it would have been a terrible song.\textsuperscript{31}

For him, rock was organic and the biggest threat to it was artifice, which was more and more difficult to avoid as rock and roll became increasingly self-aware and self-important. Most rock musicians were “too superconscious of every creative move,” something that Bangs looked to spontaneity and unrestraint to counterbalance.

On the other hand, Bangs adored the highly esoteric, experimental art music that was being produced throughout the 1970s, as rock expanded in previously unknown directions. Artistry was something that Bangs appreciated but had a complex relationship with for most of his life, stretching back to his teens when became “the sworn enemy of everything artistic in rock’n’roll.”\textsuperscript{42} He never resolved the tension between the two in his own mind; rather, he reveled in the liminal spaces and the contradictions the conflict created. He liked groups like the Velvet Underground and Frank Zappa, who were unquestionably creating artistic rock, even while regularly disdaining what he called “arty” music. The contradictions were obvious, but Bangs was full of such contradictions, as were many in this era. As Ellen Willis would say in 1979, “Insofar as it incorporates the elite, formalist values of the avant-garde, the very idea of rock’n’roll as art rests on a contradiction. Like pop art, it was antiart art made by anti-elitist elitists.”\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{42} Stax and Rachac, “Growing Up in the Dark Ages.”

\textsuperscript{43} Ellen Willis, \textit{Out of the Vinyl Deeps}, 56.
So, although Bangs’ regularly and vehemently preached an amateur, unrefined aesthetic, some of his favorite music often embodied the opposite. Some was extremely pretentious, like a 1969 Plastic Ono Band record called *Unfinished Music No. 2: Life with the Lions*, a record deemed unlistenable by nearly every contemporary rock critic who reviewed it. It was, according to Bangs, a “[landmark] in rock ‘n’ roll history” on par with *Blonde on Blonde* and *Beatles ’65.*

He called his review of the record “Better Than the Beatles (And DNA, Too),” writing that he appreciated the avant-garde and wanted to promote music that pushed the rock artistically. Though certainly hyperbolic, Bangs’ grand pronouncements forced his readers to consider the work in the context of rock-as-art. What made great rock great? For Bangs, it was the way new art challenged the listener to think differently, and if his hyperbole could press the point, all the better.

The challenging record has gained appreciation over time among fans of experimental music, so Bangs was once again ahead of the curve. For him, rock was most importantly a rebuff to dominant culture, so as rock and roll became part of the dominant culture, he tried to push it away from the status quo. He treated rock like a living thing, and he could explain its evolution as it happened to his readers. He was ahead of the game, sensing and exploring shifts in the music even as they happened. He was not only reporting on the avant-garde; he was helping to shape it.

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44 Bangs, “Better Than the Beatles.”
One group he championed, for instance, were the Shaggs, an all-female garage band whose playing was either god-awful or genius depending on your view (and most contemporary reviewers took the former). They were teenage sisters from New Hampshire managed by their father, who did not let their lack of musical skill to deter him from promoting the group. They had a raw, untrained, lo-fi sound, which sounded hapless to some, but Bangs found its strange simplicity compelling. *Rolling Stone*’s reviewer wrote that their debut was, "the most stunningly awful wonderful record I've heard," and the *New York Times* referred to it as "[m]aybe the best worst rock album ever made." Bangs declared them “better than the Beatles,” saying that *Philosophy of the World* was "a landmark in rock and roll history." His love of outsider music and amateur aesthetics was matched by his love for hyperbole. His appreciation for the band was not ironic, but it was certainly rooted in a love for the unexpected and subversive.

On the other end of the artistic spectrum was Patti Smith, who he felt strongly captured the spirit of rock and roll. For him, she embodied what was best about rock and roll. She managed to be an artist and a poet without losing the passion and spirit of an amateur. He wrote of her album “Horses” in 1976, Her sound is as new-old as her look. You hear the Shangri-Las and other early Sixties girl groups, as well as Jim Morrison, Lotte Lenya, Anisette of Savage Rose, Velvet Underground, beatniks and Arabs. Meanwhile, the minimalism of the band forces her sound out front along with the poetry, and

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46 Bangs, “Better Than the Beatles.”
that sound stands. This is not a "spoken-word" album, it’s a rock’n’roll album, and even if you couldn’t understand a word of English you couldn’t miss the emotional force of Patti’s music. And you’ll love it when she makes mistakes (in this era of slick, pre-digested "rock" as muzak), when her voice goes ragged (but right), like the perfect act of leaping for something precious. Who needs the other kind of perfection?  

Emotional, not musical, perfection is what Bangs valued, and once again he pitted the two against each other as countervailing forces. It was the shortcomings in her performance that made her compelling, “like the perfect art of leaping for something precious.”

[T]he general primitivism makes you realize you’re a mammal again and glad for it, licking your chops.

Which is not to say that there’s not musical sophistication working here; it’s just that it’s gut sophistication, unfltering instinct rather than the clammy cerebral approach of the old "poetry and jazz" albums. Horses is a commanding record, as opposed to demanding—you don’t have to work to "understand" or like it, but you can’t ignore it either; it refuses to be background music, stops the action in the room when it’s on, and leaves its effects when it’s over whether the listeners like it or not.

Each song builds with an inexorable seethe, a penchant for lust and risk that shakes you and never lets you forget you’re listening to real rock’n’roll again at last. Meanwhile, every song contains moments that go beyond raunch into emotional realms that can give you chills.

Again, he juxtaposes the “gut” against the “cerebral approach,” saying that although Smith had brought “literacy” and “poetry” to her work as well as “musical sophistication,” it was the guts that mattered most. Her work was “commanding”

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
rather than “demanding,” which meant that it elicited a natural rather than a forced reaction. For Bangs, rock and roll was at its core about visceral expression and emotional honesty, and although he appreciated artistry, it was not a requisite for good rock in the way having guts was. He writes, “Each song builds with an inexorable seethe, a penchant for lust and risk that shakes you and never lets you forget you’re listening to real rock’n’roll again at last.”50 Her failings as a singer or performer are part of what put the “real” in “real rock’n’roll” for Bangs. The biggest threat to expression, it seemed to him, was an emphasis on perfection.

For him, imperfections in music were proof of humanity, rejections and subversions of all the precision and smoothness of the culture industry. As he said of Patti Smith,

One of the amazing things is that even though she is still learning to sing her voice is all over the place, from the horny yelp of "Gloria’s" "sweet youngthuing" to the demonic way her tongue whips the word "locker" first time she says it in "Land" to the brief unearthy but heart-grazing wordless upper register vocal flight in the middle of "Elegie."51

It was in the shortcomings of others that Bangs felt most connected to them, because a deeply-seated part of his own self-identification was that of a flawed person. Since rock was primarily about personal connection and identification with the audience, and people are imperfect, “real” rock and roll required and even thrived on imperfection.

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50 Ibid.

51 Bangs, “If Stagger Lee Was a Woman.”
However, imperfection was never connection enough alone. Patti Smith was not just brilliant because she fell short, but because when she fell short it was because she was stretching for the illimitable. Bangs revered the resulting work, writing,

Patti’s music in its ultimate moments touches deep wellsprings of emotion that extremely few artists in rock or anywhere else are capable of reaching. With her wealth of promise and the most incandescent flights and stillnesses of this album she joins the ranks of people like Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, or the Dylan of "Sad Eyed Lady" and Royal Albert Hall. It’s that deeply felt, and that moving: a new Romanticism built upon the universal language of rock’n’roll, an affirmation of life so total that, even in the graphic recognition of death, it sweeps your breath away. And only born gamblers take that chance.52

When Bangs loved a work, he was the most passionate and convincing advocate an artist could ask for. His review is captivating and pinpointed precisely what made Patti Smith special.

For Smith and others whom he appreciated, simplicity and an amateur aesthetic were an important part of the appeal, but it was the fullness of expression that such an approach allowed that was the key. Bangs explained this distinction in a negative review of Alice Cooper,

I think the simplicity and the imaginative use of the cliché are at the essence of rock; but the clichés have to hit you in a certain way, with a certain conviction and energy and timing, to get it on, to spark that internal combustion of good feeling and galvanized energies that lifts you out of your seat irresistibly and starts you dancing, balling, just whooping, or whatever…And it is this that is lacking in Alice Cooper’s music. Everything falls where it should, there are none of the gross, ugly, idiotic juxtapositions

52 Ibid.
of the totally incongruous…but neither is there any hint of life, spontaneity, joy, rage, or any kind of authentic passion or conviction.\textsuperscript{53}

In championing the “simplicity…of the cliché,” Bangs was displaying what would come to be a punk sensibility. In exalting the “gross, ugly, idiotic juxtapositions of the incongruous,” Bangs subverted the idea that these much-derided aspects of rock music were negative. Like others before him, he appreciated an amateur aesthetic, but he took it further by placing what many of rock’s detractors said was wrong with the music at the center of his conception of what was good about it. Those were parts of the human experience, along with “spontaneity, joy, rage [and] passion.”\textsuperscript{54} He wanted music to express the full range of human emotions, including those that were ugly and difficult to face.

In a 1975 \textit{Creem} article called “Kraftwerkfeature,” Bangs wrote, “They used to call Chuck Berry a “guitar mechanic” (at least I heard a Moody Blues fan say that once.) Why? Because any idiot could play his lines. Which as we have all known since the prehistory of punk rock, is the very beauty of them.”\textsuperscript{55} Proficiency meant very little to Bangs, a stance that set him against the fans of prog rock bands like the Moody Blues. The genre consisted of complicated songs designed to highlight the impressive musical talents of its practitioners, and for Bangs this was the “arty” type

\textsuperscript{53} Bangs, “Pretties for You,” 37.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

of music he thought was stifling the raw essence rock, and he saw amateurism as a countervailing force.

His longstanding obsession with Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, one of the most important protopunk bands of the 1960s, presaged his preference for a unrefined aesthetic. In one of his earliest reviews, he wrote of the album “Velvet Underground,”

Can this be that same bunch of junkie — faggot — sadomasochist — speed — freaks who roared their anger and their pain in storms of screaming feedback and words spat out like strings of epithets? Yes. Yes, it can, and this is perhaps the most important lesson the Velvet Underground: the power of the human soul to transcend its darker levels.56

The album was a dark and brooding, full of the underground characters and themes that the Velvets were famous for, prompting Bangs to ask rhetorically, “The real question is what this music is about — smack, meth, deviate sex and drugdreams, or something deeper?”57 From this point on, Bangs developed a reputation as one of the Velvet’s most visible fans and champions, though even they would eventually come up against his harsh criticism. His appreciation of their aesthetic preceded the invention of the term “punk” by several years, but the values he promoted were very punk indeed.

The emergence of punk rock fulfilled these ideals Bangs had been expressing since long before the genre was conceived. At the same time as punk began to


57 Ibid.
coalesce, Bangs was one of the most influential rock critics in the country, and the most influential regarding the alternative side of rock. These factors meant that Bangs was on the front line of the new sound and helped to define it in real time. He was ensconced within the edgy environment of Creem, where “punk” music was first named as a distinct genre, and that’s where it became a central part of his criticism. He explored what it meant, what its qualities were, and why it mattered.

One important quality of a punk attitude was painful honesty, the kind that made people cringe. In an article about the Guess Who, he said he originally thought the band was “creepy,” offensive, “cranky,” and that at first these qualities turned him off. Then he says he “realized…eventually, that that kind of thing is what makes the Guess who great.” He declared,

The Guess Who is God…They have absolutely no taste at all, they don’t even mind embarrassing everybody in the audience, they’re real punks without even working too hard at it… I mean, these guys just don’t know when to quit! That’s what puts ‘em so far ahead of everyone else. They’ll say anything…he actually has the gall to in the course of his rant to list every last way that the American Woman just totally submits to and serves him, and proceeds to dump on her for ‘messing your mind.’ Man, that is true punk; that is so fucked up it’s got class up the ass.

Bangs closed the review by saying, “Fuck, all them old dudes wearing their hip tastes on their sleeves: get this and play it loud and become the first on your block to become a public nuisance.” As this line shows, their offensiveness, to Bangs’

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
mind, was really subversion of the cultural norms that dominated mainstream
culture. It was also honest in its ugliness, and Bangs found their rudeness refreshing
in a rock scene that had become, in his opinion, neutered of its power to upset the
status quo.

In an article about Iggy Pop and the Stooges called “Of Pop and Pies and
Fun,” he wrote,

What we need are more rock “stars” willing to make fools of themselves,
absolutely jump off the deep end and make the audience embarrassed for
them if necessary, so long as they have not one shred of dignity or mythic
corona left. Because then the whole damn pompous edifice of this supremely
ridiculous of conning youth and encouraging fantasies of a puissant “youth
culture,” would collapse, and with it would collapse the careers of the hyped
talentless nonentities that breed off of it.61

He then addressed the flaccidity each of the major rock gods at length, from Paul
McCartney, an “infernal snob,” to “fake money bags” Mick Jagger. He writes a few
thousand words in the section of the article called “Part Two: A Brief History” about
how rock had, over the Sixties, lost its edge. For him, punk symbolized its return. He
told his audience,

The first thing to remember about Stooge music is that it is monotonous and
simplistic on purpose, and that within the seemingly circumscribed confines
of this fuzz-feedback territory the Stooges work deftly with musical ideas
that may not be highly sophisticated (God forbid) but are certainly
advanced.62

61 Bangs, Psychotic Reactions, 34.

62 Bangs, Psychotic Reactions, 39.
By pointing out the intentionality of the sound’s simplicity, Bangs subverted any potential arguments of the music as simplistic. Instead of denying it, he put it at the center of what made the music valuable.

It was the rawness of both the sounds and emotions of punk that so moved him. He wrote, “Only one in twenty thousand has the nervy genius of Iggy or Jonathan of the Modern Lovers and is willing to sing about his adolescent hangups in a manner so painfully honest as to embarrass the piss out of half the audience.”

In this, as in other ways, Bangs mirrored his subject. Later, the punk musician Richard Hell would say Bangs’ “sincerity level was pretty near intolerable.”

On the other hand, Bangs often postured for his audience, trying very hard to make sure his readers knew how edgy he was. This, too, was seemingly part of the punk ethic as Bangs envisioned it. As he wrote in 1973, somewhat sardonically,

James Taylor is a real punk, when ya get right down to it. He never had any shame in the first place, he just sits around and gets fucked up all the time, just like most of us, and I betcha when he’s not being a Sensitive Genius he’s a getdown dude who don’t give a shit about nothin’. 

Though Bangs was far from someone who didn’t “give a shit about nothing,” this was the aesthetic he and other punks (James Taylor notwithstanding) were trying for. He had a sense of humor about it, but he also believed that being a “shameless,” “fucked up,” “getdown dude” was what punk was about.

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64 DeRogatis, Let It Blurt, 145.
It was not only in punk music that Bangs appreciated hard, raw, emotional aesthetics. He also found these qualities in outsider art, including the avant-garde. He adored Captain Beefheart’s Trout Mask Replica, a challenging experimental album that was not very popular but has stood the test of time as an influential work. He wrote,

Captain Beefheart, the only true dadaist in rock, has been victimized repeatedly by public incomprehension and critical authoritarianism…What the critics failed to see was that this was a band with a vision, that their music, difficult raucous and rough as it is, proceeded from a unique and original consciousness. Captain Beefheart’s new album is a total success, a brilliant, stunning enlargement and clarification of his art. Which is to not say that it’s in any sense slick, “artistic,” or easy.66

Bangs saw in its “raucous and rough” sound the qualities he desired in rock, and was quick to defend the album against charges of being “slick” or “artistic.” It certainly was artistic, but Bangs was loath to admit that. Instead he emphasized its aspects that jibed with his personal sensibilities. When he wrote the article, he was one of the only critics in the country to positively review the album, but in the years since, the critical consensus has shifted to Bangs’ side.67 At the time, however, the album was strange and obscure enough to make Bangs’ rave review stand out.

Although Bangs professed an anti-artistic stance, his real problem was not with artistry exactly, but the artifice that he felt accompanied it. It was only one part

66 Bangs, “Captain Beefheart.”

67 A 2006 article in the Guardian called Trout Mask Replica “a gigantic influence on so much rock music that has claimed to stand as something more than mere entertainment.” (John Harris, “Mission: Unlistenable,” The Guardian, August 4, 2006.)
of the problem. Professionalization and commercialization meant that musicians were taking themselves more seriously than ever, at the cost of the spontaneity and rebelliousness that he considered to be essence of authentic rock and roll. Bangs’ reaction was to rail hard against the problem of artifice and pretension in rock and roll. His goal wasn’t just to scold, but to aggressively delineate the bounds of what he considered good music. His polemics were not simply inflammatory, but designed to create a dialogue about what was important in music. Nonetheless, they were certainly polarizing.

Throughout his career, Bangs’ hyperbolic, incisive pans and raves defined his approach to criticism. His first article, published in *Rolling Stone* in April 1969, two years after he began submitting his work, was a negative review, a pan of MC-5’s *Kick Out the Jams*. Even this debut review had several markers of Bangs’ acerbic style. His attitude in the article is combative, containing a dig at the very magazine that just gave him his big break. He wrote, “About a month ago the MC-5 received a cover article in *Rolling Stone* proclaiming them the New Sensation, a group to break all barriers, kick out all jams, ‘total energy thing,’ etc. etc. etc. Never mind that they came on like a bunch of 16-year-old punks on a meth power trip.”

From right out of the gate, Bangs came across as a contrarian, a role that he embraced throughout his career. Attempting to deflate their reputation for being among the greats, Bangs writes, “For my money they come on more like Blue Cheer than Trane and Sanders,

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but my money has already gone for a copy of this ridiculous, overbearing, pretentious album.” Bangs’ penchant for hyperbole shows in this article. He didn’t hate the MC-5, in fact he liked them, but if he did not like something a group did, he tended to write about it in an extreme way that made it seem as though he hated it. Really, the intensity of his reactions was more about Bangs’ personality than the music he was reviewing.

In the same issue of *Rolling Stone*, the first Bangs was ever featured in, another of his pieces was published. This one was even more shocking in Bangs’ liberal usage of what can only be described as invective. In a review of “It’s A Beautiful Day,” a self-titled release from a psychedelic rock band, Bangs let fly with his vitriol:

> Not only is this album not rock and roll, it is not even, for all it is arch pseudo-profundities, serious music… [The group] is schooled to the point of waxy lifelessness, their music punctuated by turgid, theatrical outbursts. The compositions are too precious to live…I could hardly stand to sit still through this piece of shit…In conclusion: I hate this album. I hate it not only because I wasted my money on it, but for what it represents: an utterly phony, arty approach to music that we will not soon escape.

The extreme vehemence with which Bangs rejects is partly a reflection of the passion he felt about rock and roll, but it was just as much about his over-the-top personality. After this negative review, Clive Davis, head of Capitol Records, the

69 Ibid, 16-17.

label that produced the album, became enraged with Jann Wenner for publishing the excoriating article.

This was not the only time he got in trouble with Wenner for his harsh approach. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he was famously fired from the magazine in 1973 for being “disrespectful to bands” after a negative review of Canned Heat. 71 Relative to the above “It’s A Beautiful Day” review, he gave them a gentle ribbing, with most of his insults cast as sarcastic barbs. For example, of one of their albums, he wrote that unlike their other music, “most of it was actually listenable.” 72 Similarly, he jabbed, “Canned Heat disappeared from the sets there for a while…and what was really sad was that nobody missed ‘em.” 73 Later, he admitted to “making fun of them,” saying, “I guess you’re not supposed to do that.” 74 Wenner certainly thought not, and sacked him.

At Creem, he could publish what he liked, no matter how mean it was, and he did. In a review of “Chicago at Carnegie Hall, Volumes I, II, III, IV,” Bangs was at peak sarcasm. His piece opened,

I like this album because it’s on Columbia. I trust them, I believe in their product, because Columbia is the General Motors of the record industry. They consistently come up with the best of everything: best logo, best lettering in artists’ names and album titles, best photography, best cardboard…But being on Columbia isn’t the only thing that makes Chicago at Carnegie Hall a classic. If you balk at buying by brand alone, another

71 DeRogatis, “Final Chat with Lester Bangs.”
72 Bangs, Mainlines, 37.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
surefire way of gauging the worth of an album is to take a gander at the grooves themselves. Notice the light and dark patterns. If there are more light patterns than dark ones, it means the grooves are wider, which means that the record is heavier because there’s more music crammed into each groove. Not only does this album weigh in at 3.23 pounds, but it’s so jam packed with sounds that it’s got grooves wide enough to satisfy even the most picayune of connoisseurs. Anybody that tells me it’s not the heaviest album of the year doesn’t know his math.

Loving Chicago at Carnegie Hall as much as I do, I still don’t play it very often. In fact, I’ve only played it once since I got it, and never intend to play any of it again. But then, I don’t really have to; it is sufficient unto itself; an existing entity, and playing it too much would only put smudges and scratches on its pristine surfaces. So who cares if it’s Chicago’s worst album? Does it really matter that the songs sound exactly like they do on the studio albums except for being immeasurably more sodden and stuffed with long directionless solos? (…)

Decidedly not. And for those of you who recognize the essential need for an album such as this, and don’t want to defile your own copies even by breaking the shrinkwrap, I will list the highlights of the eight sides. 75

Bangs pulls no punches in this blistering review. He has no respect for the album, and his writing reflected that by reducing the record to an elaborate joke. There is also a degree of grandstanding involved in the way Bangs insulted the band, who would have been disliked already by many of Creem’s edgy readership. It is more funny than it is informative. As was often the case, the article became more about Bangs and his personality than the record. But it is funny, and it was in his pans where his wry humor came through most strongly.

His determination to challenge the status quo in rock is the reason positive reviews from Bangs were the exception rather than the rule. From the beginning, he

75 Psych 97, Creem 1972
showed a notable tendency toward tough criticism of the genre—an approach that was only recently emerging in the world of pop music. Partly, this was a result of Bangs’ own argumentative personality, but it was also a product of the times and the state of rock and roll. Bangs was just as capable of writing a rave review as a pan, and although he did so less often, his praise was as exuberant as his insults. A strong thread of skepticism was developing within the rock community itself, as threats to authentic rock culture seemed to be coming from within as much as without.

I think that, in this time of recession/depression and with the whole music business tightening its belt, it is truly thoughtful of Lou to cut recording costs as much as MMM must have, especially when you consider the stupefying self-indulgence of so many of today’s rock "masterpieces" with their overproductions so baroquely lavish it all turns to tinsel. Only James Brown, I think, approaches Lou’s achievement here in terms of sheer economy and minimal booking of expensive studio time. MMM is actually, far from some nihilist rampage, one giant WIN button.76

Rock no longer needed a champion to convince the public of its value as a genre; it needed a critic who could cut through the myths inflated by money and fame to what really mattered in music—whatever that was. For Bangs, it was about authenticity and self-expression. Bangs knew better than anyone how mutable and contingent such notions were, but he still expressed his opinions with conviction. It was what he liked and personally identified with that determined whether he gave a positive or negative review. His feelings did not override his objectivity as much as he never tried to be objective in the first place.

76 Bangs, “Metal Music Machine.”
His positive reviews were often as rapturous as his negative reviews were contemptuous, but they were more personal and deeply heartfelt. An excellent example of this aspect of his style is his review of Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks*. In what is one of the best long-form reviews of his career, he conveys the experience of listening to what is an extremely challenging, masterful record:

What this is about is a whole set of verbal tics - although many are bodily as well - which are there for reason enough to go a long way toward defining his style. They're all over Astral Weeks: four rushed repeats of the phrases "you breathe in, you breath out" and "you turn around" in "Beside You"; in "Cyprus Avenue," twelve "way up on's," "baby" sung out thirteen times in a row sounding like someone running ecstatically downhill toward one's love, and the heartbreaking way he stretches "one by one" in the third verse; most of all in "Madame George" where he sings the word "dry" and then "your eye" twenty times in a twirling melodic arc so beautiful it steals your own breath… 77

Without even listening to the record, a reader could still get a sense of what kind of music to expect; however, it is the reader who has already heard the album for whom this article holds the most power. He captures the thrill of listening to Morrison’s virtuosic performance. His prose is wound together with Morrison’s music, fostering a deeper, enriched connection with the album. Particular phrases capture the ecstasy Bangs felt when listening to the record. Saying that a vocal run in "Cyprus Avenue" sounded “like someone running ecstatically downhill toward one's love” is Bangs’ imagery, not Morrison’s. Bangs’ strong emotional connection with the music he wrote about comes through powerfully in this piece, and his writing about art

77 Ibid.
transcends criticism and becomes an art. The evocative language enhances the beauty of Morrison’s work, adding to the intoxicating effect of the record.

Bangs had the ability to infect others with his zeal over music, nowhere more than in this review of one of his favorite albums. The listening experience became something new when Bangs wrote about it. He went on,

Van Morrison is interested, obsessed with how much musical or verbal information he can compress into a small space, and, almost, conversely, how far he can spread one note, word, sound, or picture. To capture one moment, be it a caress or a twitch. He repeats certain phrases to extremes that from anybody else would seem ridiculous, because he's waiting for a vision to unfold, trying as unobtrusively as possible to nudge it along. Sometimes he gives it to you through silence, by choking off the song in midflight: "It's too late to stop now!"78

In this sense, it is an exegesis more than a simple review. He is trying to draw out the reason the music is so transcendent, finding the parts of it that elevate the emotion and beauty of it to another level. He finds the moments when Morrison pushes himself and the listener, the effect of which was to overwhelm both with the power of his art.

The album had such meaning for him that it was almost as though he was rhapsodizing about a religious text:

It's the great search, fueled by the belief that through these musical and mental processes illumination is attainable. Or may at least be glimpsed. When he tries for this he usually gets it more in the feeling than in the Revealed Word - perhaps much of the feeling comes from the reaching - but there is also, always, the sense of WHAT if he DID apprehend that Word; there are times when the Word seems to hover very near. And then there are times when we realize the Word was right next to us, when the most

mundane overused phrases are transformed: I give you "love," from "Madame George.

I haven’t got the slightest idea what that ‘means,’ though on one level I’d like to approach it in a manner as indirect and evocative as the lyrics themselves. Because you’re in trouble anyway when you sit yourself down to explicate just exactly what a mystical document, which is what Astral Weeks is, means.\textsuperscript{79}

The capitalization of “Word,” the use of the term “Revealed Word,” and the description of the album as a “mystical document” are all consistent with Bangs reading the album as a religious document. The Christian terminology was intentionally employed, and Bangs read the text as if it were scripture. Bangs wasn’t just arguing that rock was art. He was making a far greater claim—that rock and roll, like hundreds of years of music before it, could be a spiritual experience.

When it came to interviewing musicians, even his idols, his approach was totally different than the writers who came before him. In the New Journalism style, he tried to bring his reader into the experience of meeting the artists. But in the Gonzo tradition, he also made his own personality a prominent part of the stories. Writing about the band Crabby Appleton, Bangs wrote,

We sat at the edge of the pool and made a dutiful attempt to conduct the standard popstar interview with Crabby, but soon realized that the unusual questions were much less rewarding than simply chewing the rag and with the band. They have a sense of humor and whimsy that won’t submit to requests for expostulation of What It All Means, but if you wait long enough, you get the whole story anyway and with a certain rambling eloquence.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{79} Astral Weeks

By distancing himself from the “What It All Means” types, what Goldstein had called the “What’s your favorite color types,” he was not saying that the music wasn’t meaningful nor was it unimportant to him to explore the musicians as people. His view, rather, was that the most accurate picture of the bands would come through when the interaction with the subjects was authentic.

Bangs toed the line between critic and subject, admitting to getting “starry eyed” about rock stars. He spent time with them socially and developed personal relationships with some of his favorite musicians. On the one hand, his relationships with rock stars meant that he could better show who they were to his readers. On the other hand, the way he wrote about them was affected by his feelings. Some of the best examples of his complicated approach to rock stars, are articles he wrote about Lou Reed, his favorite musician.

Bangs and Reed had had a strange relationship from when they first met in 1969. Reed had read Bangs’ positive review of his band, the Velvet Underground, and appreciated it, but he found Bangs overwhelming and off-putting in person. It was the beginning of a long relationship in which Bangs served as Reed’s biggest fan and staunchest critic. Their odd interactions made for interesting, original, and most importantly, revealing interviews. Bangs wrote of a 1973 meeting between the two,

My personal payoff with Lou came when we got back to the hotel after the gig. About a dozen people sat around a shadowy suite while the Original Phantom Purveyor of the New Rock got drunk on his ass and rambled on to

81 DeRogatis, 186.
the point of babble. I got totally blasted myself, my disappointment came through and I started baiting him: "Hey Lou, doncha think Judy Garland was a piece of shit and better off dead?"\textsuperscript{82}

Reed was “drunk off his ass” and “rambling,” but he was also the “Original Phantom Purveyor of the New Rock.” Within a single sentence, Bangs captured the duality of Reed: the loser and the hero. When he baits Reed, it’s as though he is a child acting out his disappointment with his role model. His petulance only adds to the honest, if awkward, depiction of the scene.

The Reed/Bangs rivalry, punctuated by grudging mutual admiration, was ongoing. In a \textit{Creem} review in 1975, he again interviewed Reed:

LESTER: I saw Bowie the other night.
LOU: Lucky you. I think it’s very sad.
LESTER: He ripped off all your riffs, obviously.
LOU: Everybody steals riffs. You steal yours. David wrote some really great songs.
LESTER: Aw, c’mon…anybody can write great songs! Sam the Sham wrote great songs! Did David ever write anything better than “Wooly Bully”?\textsuperscript{83}
LOU: You ever listen to the Bewlay Brothers, shithead?
LESTER: Yeah, fucker, I listened to those fuckin’ lyrics, motherfucker!
LOU: Name one lyric from that song.
LESTER: I didn’t listen—I’ve heard it…but what I and millions of fans all over wanna know about Bowie is: first you, then Jagger, then Iggy. What in the hell’s he got?
LOU: Jagger and Iggy?
LESTER: Yeah, you know he fucks everybody in the rock and roll circuit. He’s a bigger groupie than Jann Wenner!
LOU: He’s the one who’s getting fucked.
LESTER: Didja fuck ‘im?
LOU: He’s fucking himself. He doesn’t know it, though.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{82} Bangs, “Metal Music Machine.”

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
This was about as far from the awkward, unhip approach that preceded rock criticism as it was possible to get. Not only was the discussion informal, it was also adversarial at times. Bangs spoke to Reed like he would speak to anyone, which immediately makes Reed seem more accessible and real. The exchange of epithets between the two leaves the reader wondering how adversarial the relationship between the two was. And that’s what was represented in the interview—a relationship. It was on a different level of intimacy than other rock writers with their subjects, mostly because of Bangs’ different personality.

In a 1975 article titled, “Let Us Now Praise Famous Death Dwarves, or, How I Slugged It Out with Lou Reed and Stayed Awake,” Bangs wrote of his relationship with Reed,

The fact is that Lou, like all heroes, is there for the beating up. They wouldn’t be heroes if they were infallible, in fact they wouldn’t be heroes if they weren’t miserable wretched dogs, the pariahs of the earth, besides which the only reason to build up an idol is to tear it down again…

He conveyed the intimacy of the scene with himself as the centerpiece of the story. Reading Bangs’ interviews with Reed is like two equals, both great artists at the top of their games, butting heads in a display of dominance. Bangs’ persona was more present in his writing, especially in his interviews, than any of his contemporaries.

His approach to celebrity was considerably more callous than most critics’, which was in keeping with his cynical personality and rejection of politeness. One

particularly insightful and heartfelt piece on the subject came on the heels of Elvis Presley’s death in 1977. “Where Were You When Elvis Died” was a highly perceptive examination of the concept of rock idols. He had just moved to New York City in 1976, living in Greenwich Village and working for the Village Voice. Some of his most thoughtful and affecting examples of his cultural criticism came from this period.

Much of this was due to his working relationship with the Voice’s rock editor, Robert Christgau. This would be the first time Bangs would be carefully edited by a publication, and Christgau was establishing the newspaper as a premier source of rock criticism, grooming a stable of talented writers. Under Christgau, Bangs’ vitality was never stifled, but his genius was given guidance. Of working with Bangs, Christgau says, “Although he was a more coherent, punctual, professional journalist than 90 per cent of the editors who considered him a lunatic, his autodidactic moralism, chronic logorrhea, and fantastic imagination rendered him unsuitable for the slicks.”

It was a challenge for Bangs, who had achieved fame and success without ever being seriously challenged as a writer. DeRogatis writes, “For the first time in his career, Lester struggled with doing numerous rewrites on some pieces and having others rejected by the Voice after days or weeks of work.”

Christgau pushed Bangs, telling him once, “You’re resting on ideas we’ve all

85 Obituary of Lester Bangs, Village Voice.

86 DeRogatis, Let It Blurt, 138.
thought of! “The combination of the two personalities—Christgau’s meticulousness and Bangs’ untethered genius—combined to create some of Bangs’ best, most thoughtful, and mature work.

His magnum opus during this period was the elegy to the late King, entitled “Where Were You When Elvis Died?” In the introduction to his piece, Bangs wrote, “Elvis had left us each alone as he was; I mean, he wasn’t exactly a Man of the People anymore, if you get my drift. If you don’t I will drift even further, away from Elvis into contemplation of why all our public heroes seem to reinforce our own solitude.” In typical Bangs fashion, this was not going to be a eulogy, or at least a positive one. Bangs’ attitude wasn’t spiteful or nasty, but it was emotionally honest and direct in a brutal way.

He wrote that he did not “see Elvis as a tragic figure; I see him as being more like the Pentagon, a giant armored institution nobody knows anything about except that its power is legendary.” Bangs interpreted Elvis’ distance from his audience as “scorn for his fans,” a cardinal sin in his eyes. Unlike other rock critics who “sort of perversely celebrated [him] for his utter contempt for whoever cared for him,” Bangs saw through his image to “the dumb lackey he always was.” He believed that Elvis

87 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
returned his fans’ abject love with disdain, and just because Elvis had died did not change this fact.

Elvis’ fans continued to worship him despite the mediocre material he put out later in his career. Bangs viewed this as a betrayal by Elvis. He wrote,

they loved him without qualification, no matter what he dumped on them they loyally lapped it up, and that's why I feel a hell of a lot sorrier for all those poor jerks than for Elvis himself. I mean, who's left they can stand all night in the rain for? Nobody, and the true tragedy is the tragedy of an entire generation which refuses to give up its adolescence even as it feels its menopausal paunch begin to blossom and its hair recede over the horizon—along with Elvis and everything else they once thought they believed in.  

Fans’ love of Elvis in the face of his waning career was really, according to Bangs, an attachment to their lost youths. They never let go of Elvis despite the diminishing returns on their affections because he was a symbol of their pasts. He was doing the type of work he spoke of when he later wrote,

If rock ‘n’ roll is truly the democratic art form, then democracy has got to begin at home; that is, the everlasting and totally disgusting walls between artists and audience must come down, elitism must perish, the ‘stars’ have got to be humanized, demythologized, and the audience has got to be treated with respect.  

For him, it was about leveling the field between fans and musicians with himself functioning as the mediator. The audience member rather than the artist was Bangs’ primary concern, at least ideally.

\[91 \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[92 \text{ Ibid, 170.}\]
After first stripping Elvis of his mystique and then explaining the symbolism behind his appeal, to explaining what Bangs believed he represented about American culture on a deeper level. To Bangs, he was emblematic of the problems of the 1970s. He wrote,

because Elvis stood for that Nixonian Secrecy-as-Virtue which was passed off as the essence of Americanism for a few years there. In a sense he could be seen not only as a phenomenon that exploded in the fifties to help shape the psychic jailbreak of the Sixties but ultimately as a perfect cultural expression of what the Nixon years were all about. Not that he prospered more then, but that his passion for the privacy of potentates allowed him to get away with almost literal murder, certainly with the symbolic rape of his fans, meaning that we might all do better to think about waving good-bye with one upraised finger.\(^93\)

Elvis had become part of the establishment, a flaccid, bloated version of a rock star in the same way that rock had on large scale. The death of Elvis brought out nostalgia about the good old days of rock. Bangs says,

Elvis Presley was the man who brought overt blatant vulgar sexual frenzy to the popular arts in America (and thereby to the nation itself, since putting "popular arts" and "America" in the same sentence seems almost redundant). It has been said that he was the first white to sing like a black person, which is untrue in terms of hard facts but totally true in terms of cultural impact. But what's more crucial is that when Elvis started wiggling his hips and Ed Sullivan refused to show it, the entire country went into a paroxysm of sexual frustration leading to abiding discontent which culminated in the explosion of psychedelic-militant folklore which was the Sixties.\(^94\)

Elvis, it seemed, was a reminder of the excitement and promise of a time before rock’s promise unraveled—and Elvis along with it. Elvis was a singular figure,

\(^{93}\) Ibid.

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
someone who “opened the floodgates” of sexual expression, and ultimately personal expression, in rock 'n' roll.

Since then, however, rock had undergone a fundamental change. It had become splintered or fragmented since the days when Elvis was king. Bangs wrote of this shift:

[A]long with our nurtured indifference to each other will be an even more contemptuous indifference to each other’s objects of reverence...We will continue to fragment in this manner, because solipsism holds all the cards at present; it is a king whose domain engulfs even Elvis's. But I can guarantee you one thing: we will never again agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis. So I won't bother saying good-bye to his corpse. I will say good-bye to you.95

It was a eulogy to rock and roll itself; any doubt that rock and roll still existed as it once had, as a unified cultural moment, was gone. Though Bangs believed that worthy music was being created within the offshoots of rock, particularly in punk and new wave, rock and roll as such was dead.

This rumination on the nature of celebrity and the shifts in rock and roll culture were the work of a writer who had matured both in his craft and in his personal life. His views were essentially the same as they had always been, but the refinement of his thought brought his ideas to a new level of effectiveness. His maturity came through in his other writing for the Village Voice, where he began to take on social issues in a way he had never done before. Although his influence on broader American culture was limited, his influence within the punk scene was strong.

95 Ibid.
When it came to the politics, Bangs was interested, but not actively involved, in social justice movements. Although rock and roll was a fundamentally political form, as the other critics have demonstrated, the simultaneous meltdown of the Sixties countercultural movement and the dissolution of the rock genre in the 1970s meant the loss of much of rock’s political content. The punk scene was anti-authoritarian, purposefully outrageous, and vulgar, and it ranged from apolitical to outright offensive.

As punk music developed over the course of the seventies, Bangs’ role within the punk intellectual community became increasingly important. Not only was he an influential writer on the subject, but with his move to New York City in 1976, he was a member of the scene. He was well-respected for his work and his reputation for extreme partying made him a legend among younger fans. When it came to social issues, Bangs felt the pressure of his role more over time as he became older and more influential. For most of his career, he was reckless about the example he was setting.

Early punk was a reaction against mainstream culture, but it was also a rejection of the hopeful politics of the Sixties generation, which the punks viewed as a failure. Part of their response was a rejection of the racial politics and adoption of the stance of outsiders, outside of race altogether. However, the subculture was overwhelmingly white, and their conception of themselves as existing outside of race was a privilege that only came with their Whiteness. Inflaming the issue was a fetishization of Nazi and fascist symbolism by punk musicians from the beginning of
the genre. What resulted in short order was a culture in which the use of racist terms and ideas became widely acceptable, if not commonplace.

Bangs was someone for whom a social conscience came slowly. As late as 1974, Bangs pronounced in front of a music conference that Curtis Mayfield was “only fucking nigger music.” In 1975, Bangs was photographed wearing a shirt that said “The Last of the White Niggers.” Though he was a fan of black music, his racist language revealed his prejudices and indicates his lack of regard for racial sensitivities. However, from the mid-Seventies, he became increasingly liberal and underwent a sea change in his ideas about social responsibility.

In “The White Noise Supremacists,” published in the Village Voice in 1979, Bangs took on the problem of racism within the punk rock community from a completely different perspective than he had displayed before. Bangs admitted that he had been a part of the problem in the past. He confessed that he was,

[A]ctually rather proud of myself for writing things like…: "Now, as we all know, white hippies and beatniks before them would never have existed had there not been a whole generational subculture with a gnawing yearning to be nothing less than the downest baddest niggers. . . . Everybody has been walking around for the last year or so acting like faggots ruled the world, when in actuality it's the niggers who control and direct everything just as it always has been and properly should be.” I figured all this was in the Lenny Bruce spirit of let's-defuse-them-epithets-byslinging-'em-out in Detroit. I thought absolutely nothing of going to parties with people like David Ruffin and Bobby Womack where I'd get drunk, maul the women, and improvise blues songs along the lines of "Sho' wish ah wuz a nigger / Then mah dick'd be bigger," and of course they all laughed. It took years before I realized

96 DeRogatis, 93.

97 DeRogatis, 153.
what an asshole I'd been, not to mention how lucky I was to get out of there with my white hide intact.  

Bangs didn’t defend himself. He had matured and realized that his attitude was unacceptable. Having been guilty of it himself, could explain not only his own motivations, but also what it was about the scene that fostered such bigotry. He dug deep into the nature of the scene to do so, and it became a fascinating commentary on the alienation and disillusionment that was at the heart of punk.

Bangs saw an “overwhelming spiritual flatness” amongst the members of the scene, which included fans and musicians. With the decline of Sixties idealism, what was left was,

a bunch of people finally freed by the collapse of all values to reinvent themselves, to make art statements of their whole lives. Unfortunately, such a great utopian dream, which certainly is not on its first go-round here, remains just that, because most people would rather follow.  

In this vacuum of morality, where amorality in fact became a touchstone of the culture, the worst came out in fans. They treated racism casually in a way that only people privileged to be in an in-group could. For self-styled “outsiders,” they showed little sympathy or awareness for those from actual out-groups.

Bangs thought it was insidious, but understood the phenomenon and could explain why racism was a problem in punk. He wrote,

It's a little coiled clot of venom lurking there in all of us, white and black, goy and Jew, ready to strike out when we feel embattled, belittled, brutalized.

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99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.
Which is why it has to be monitored, made taboo and restrained, by society and the individual. But there's a difference between hate and a little of the old epater gob at authority: swastikas in punk are basically another way for kids to get a rise out of their parents and maybe the press, both of whom deserve the irritation. To the extent that most of these spikedomes ever had a clue on what that stuff originally meant, it only went so far as their intent to shock. "It's like a stance," as Ivan says. "A real immature way of being dangerous." Maybe. Except that after a while this casual, even ironic embrace of the totems of bigotry crosses over into the real poison.\(^{101}\)

He was not making excuses for the behavior of punk fans, but explaining its origins was an important part of the process of dealing with it. Shock had become a currency and it expressed a very real sense of alienation among youth. However, it was misdirected, which was the danger of a culture based around aimless disaffection.

Bangs became a moral voice from the vacuum, someone who understood the impulse behind the racism but spoke up against it. He explained, between friends, where a certain bond of mutual trust has been firmly established, good natured racial tradeoffs can be part of the vocabulary of understood affections. But beyond that trouble begins—when you fail to realize that no matter how harmless your intentions are, there is no reason to think that any shit that comes out of your mouth is going to be understood or happily received. Took me a long time to find it out, but those words are lethal, man, and you shouldn't just go slinging them around for effect. This seems almost too simple and obvious to say, but maybe it's good to have some-thing simple and obvious stated once in a while, especially in this citadel of journalistic overthink.\(^{102}\)

By reminding fans that their words had consequences, Bangs showed that his politics weren’t as aimless as they seemed. He was no longer just shooting from the hip, but interested in making genuine positive change.

\(^{101}\) Ibid.
\(^{102}\) Ibid.
Part of Bangs’ more mature attitude came with age. By this point, he had been writing rock criticism for more than ten years. He was no longer the rowdy upstart, but was practically an elder statesman within the profession, which skewed young then as it does now. Another major factor was Bangs’ new position as a writer at the *Village Voice* under editor Robert Christgau. Whereas the other publications wound up Lester Bangs and let him go, the *Voice* edited Bangs closely, a change from its early days when Goldstein’s “Pop Eye” went essentially unedited.

The *Village Voice* with Christgau at the helm had good writing and respectability, which, when combined with Bangs’ natural charismatic appeal, made for some of his best work. At the *Voice*, he was required by Christgau to submit multiple rewrites of his articles. His off-the-cuff, often drug-fueled work had a certain intensity that wasn’t lost with revisions, but was reigned in. It was crucial to their work together that Christgau understood and appreciated Bangs’ special talent. Christgau wrote years later, “It was his heart, heart that never compromised his tremendous intelligence and always fed off his humor and his endless love of music…that made Bangs the wonder he was.”

As he aged, Bangs stopped feeling like an important part of the rock community as he had in the past. He struggled with the idea that he was becoming irrelevant. He stopped going out so much and his superhuman output slowed. In the 1981 Village Voice Pazz and Jop’s Critics Poll, Bangs showed how he felt about the

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state of rock 'n' roll by turning in a blank ballot. Attached was a letter that read, in part:

New Wave has terminated in thudding hollow Xeroxes of poses that aren't even annoying anymore. Rap is nothing, or not enough. Jazz does not exist as a musical form with anything new to say. And the rest of rock is recycling various formulae forever. I don't know what I'm going to write about - music is the only thing in the world I really care about - but I simply cannot pretend to find anything compelling in the choice between pap and mud.104

According to Robert Christgau, Bangs was “enmeshed in a life-drama of musical betrayal and reconciliation until he goddamn died…he dreamed of escaping rockcrit and becoming a ‘real writer.’”105 Though he had had dreams of being a novelist and a musician, he found it impossible to make a living doing anything other than writing rock criticism. So, he continued to write about music through his death in 1982 of an overdose of the cold medicine Darvon, despite believing that it had declined to the point of irrelevance.

Bangs was a legend in his profession during his lifetime, but it was after his death that he became more widely known by American audiences. His early demise meant that he passed into the ranks of the geniuses gone-to-soon, elevating his profile. Christgau, writes,

Posthumously, he's become the noncharismatic Elvis of rock writers: obscene provocateur and polite mama's boy, vulnerable and egotistic, trashily prolific and artistically transcendent, anti-drug and full-time addict (who died young that way); but most of all forgiven everything and adored by his fans while being the most popular model for those who would essay his trade.106

104 DeRogatis, 222.
105 Christgau, “Impolite Discourse.”
In his introduction to Bangs’ collection entitled *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, his former editor and cultural critic Greil Marcus wrote, "Perhaps what this book demands from a reader is the willingness to accept that the best writer in America could write almost nothing but record reviews." Such proclamations show the esteem Bangs was held in by his colleagues, but the most important aspect of his work was in his connection with his audience. This was the rubric by which he measured authenticity, both in himself and his favorite music.

Lester Bangs was driven to write about rock, and he was a natural. He could sit down, often on drugs, and produce dozens of pages of criticism in a single night. In some ways, he was limited by this; his writing talents did not translate into a great novel or a good rock band. He wasn’t cut out for it, no matter how hard he tried.

With rock journalism, it was effortless for him. Perhaps his maturity was delayed by this; it took a decade for him to get editors who challenged him, and even longer for to develop the social consciousness others of his kin exhibited from their early days in the game. However, his maturation on the page is part of his appeal. In no other rock writer do we see as raw and honest a figure as Bangs.

In this way, he lived what he wrote. Authentic expression and connection with an audience were, for Bangs, the marker of artistic success. He did not care about what was considered good or bad, either by the establishment or the counterculture. He cared about what he liked, and in doing so he stood in defiance of

107 Greil Marcus, Introduction to *Psychotic Reactions*. 
cultural expectations. He was the center of his own intellectual world, and as such answered only to himself and his audience. He spoke of his philosophy on rock criticism shortly before his death, and in doing so captured what he hoped would be his own contribution to the form of rock criticism:

[Y]ou can start from ground zero and reinvent yourself and thereby society…and doing so you can recreate yourself and you can also come up with something that is not only original and creative and artistic, but also maybe even decent, or moral if I can use words like that, or something that’s like basically good.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{108}Sue Matthews, Interview with Lester Bangs, New York, NY, May 13, 1980.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

When rock criticism debuted onto the cultural scene, it was into a context in which rock was viewed by most cultural authorities and many adults as an empty, degraded, and even insidious form. To them, it was like candy—cheap, easily produced, devoid of content, and bad for you. To teens and young people across America, it meant something very different. For a generation that felt particularly alienated from their parents’ culture, rock and roll was an important outlet, one that was entirely separate from their parents. Rock music was a language that was theirs alone.

Because older Americans who generally disdained rock music controlled cultural institutions, it was particularly vulnerable to their interference. Censorship and market manipulation resulted, and this was alarming to some of the young intellectuals who valued rock and roll. To them, it was an art form, not just a commodity. They believed that it deserved the respect, and more importantly, the expressive protections given to other arts.

To the majority of baby boomers in the 1960s and 1970s, rock was incredibly meaningful. Not only was it the common language of their generation, but it was an important vehicle for political and social messages. By censoring or obstructing the authentic expression of rock musicians, meddlesome adults threatened to adulterate its content. At a time when cultural change was reaching into every corner of American life, rock and roll was a crucial part of young peoples’ rebellion against
the status quo. To them, rock was not just art—it was a mode of political and personal expression.

In championing rock music, rock critics like Richard Goldstein and Ellen Willis changed the way that the popular form was perceived by the American public. Young people who already knew its cultural power got important affirmation, and the older generation was successfully lobbied to afford the music basic protections and even grudging respect. Only a year after rock criticism’s debut, the tenor of the conversation about rock in the cultural establishment had undergone a sea change. From the New York Times to the Metropolitan Opera, rock was making headway into the hierarchy of worthy art. This permanently altered perceptions of the relationship between commercialism and art by establishing that a popular commodity could be culturally significant.

Meanwhile, however, the increasing exposure of the music to new audiences blunted its edginess, and its ballooning financial worth threatened what rock critics perceived as its authenticity. The more money that was at stake, the less likely rock labels and performers were to release culturally or politically challenging music. The broader audience for rock and roll meant a loss of much of its important social and cultural content. In part, this had to do with political changes at the end of the 1960s. A wave of disillusionment swept across the youth of the country, blunting their faith in the transformative cultural power of rock.

In another sense, this mainstreaming of rock music’s content was a result of the success of rock criticism. The headway made by pioneers like Goldstein and
Willis initiated the entry of rock music into the cultural mainstream, creating an opportunity that was seized upon by hip capitalists intent on monetizing the counterculture. The most prominent of these, *Rolling Stone*’s Jann Wenner, helped make rock more popular and lucrative than ever. But his magazine also diluted the genre, promoting styles that were most widely popular, and employing writers that would follow his lead. In the 1970s, partly as a result of the corporatization of rock and roll that *Rolling Stone* was emblemized, there was a backlash against the slick conformity that had taken over the genre.

At the head of this charge was Lester Bangs, who brought attention to the lack of authentic expression in the highly-produced, broadly appealing music that dominated the early Seventies. Like Goldstein and Willis, he valued the ability of rock to serve as a mode of youthful expression, and found that the art of rock was in its directness and honesty. He oversaw a period of backlash within rock and roll, when the form splintered into subgenres. Some of these, like punk and metal, aimed to return rock music to its primal, unrestrained roots. To Bangs and other fans of these subgenres, mainstream rock had become too affected by commercial interests to contain the youthful rebellion that had originally animated the genre.

In only a decade, from 1966 to 1976, rock criticism went from non-existent to a ubiquitous part of American culture. Every major American newspaper and most mainstream magazines had their own in-house rock critics. At the same time, rock’s reputation changed. It went from being a derided countercultural form to a highly commercialized cultural machine, changing the nature of its content and
form. With new branches that seemed to be growing exponentially, rock was no longer a subject that could be approached monolithically. As its subgenres multiplied, so did the splintering of rock criticism into corresponding subtypes. This changed the nature of the work just as it changed the nature of rock.

Richard Goldstein, dejected from the psychological traumas of the late Sixties, quit his job as a rock critic and retired briefly to a commune. He continued to write and was an editor for the Village Voice through 2004, when he was fired after thirty years at the paper. In its pages, he had created something new and powerful—rock criticism—and when he moved on from that, he continued to change the world in other ways. After coming out as a gay man in 1970s, Goldstein established the Village Voice’s enormously influential “queer issue,” which from its debut in 1979 has confronted issues that are important to the LGBTQ+ community. In 2001, he received a GLAAD award as columnist of the year. He teaches at Hunter College, his alma mater, and has recently revisited his pioneering years as a rock critic in his biography, Another Piece of My Heart. His contributions to the genre have been acknowledged by many of his peers, who acknowledge him as the first rock critic. In this role, he set the standard for rock criticism. His creative, evocative writing, acute understanding of rock’s social and political role, and view of rock as an important expressive outlet for young people endures in the field of pop criticism to this day. He showed the world that rock music was a cultural force to be reckoned with.

Ellen Willis, like Goldstein, burned out on the promises of the Sixties, and her dedication to writing about rock music suffered in turn. She turned her attention
to radicalism, becoming a prominent feminist icon and “one of the great public intellectuals of her generation.” She engaged in highly visible debates over such subjects as abortion, pornography, and the traditional family in magazines like The Nation, Dissent, and Ms. She wrote about Monica Lewinsky from a feminist point of view, 9/11 from a radical leftist position, and throughout, she wrote about the continuing echoes of the 1960s on American political culture. In 1997, she wrote an excoriating article in the Los Angeles Times about fellow public intellectual Christopher Lasch that accused him of sexism and called him “cranky” and “dogmatic.” This was only one of several debates she engaged in in the public sphere, and in her capacity as a public intellectual she was as bold and unapologetic as she had been as a rock critic.

From the mid-nineties, she taught a cultural and critical program at NYU, which she helped found, through her death in 2006 of lung cancer. After her passing, interest in her legacy has risen, particularly in her early and formative role in rock criticism. Her importance as a pioneering rock journalist, feminist, and public intellectual has been affirmed in recent years. Her daughter, Nona Willis Aronowitz, has led the efforts to make her mother’s role in the advent of rock criticism more visible. By elevating the level of discourse around rock, Willis added to the power of its political and cultural influence. She also challenged both musicians and fans to live up to the rebellious and even radical qualities that she believed animated rock.

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Jann Wenner and *Rolling Stone* continue to be two of the most influential forces in the world of pop music. Straight Arrow Publications has expanded to several magazines, and is a multi-billion-dollar corporation. *Rolling Stone* churns out special editions and books every year that rank rock musicians, with titles like “100 Greatest Artists of All Time,” “100 Greatest Albums of the Eighties,” and “500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” These lists, still highly reflective of the tastes and proclivities displayed by Wenner in the Sixties and seventies, continue to influence notions of rock canon and musical value.

Wenner has also extended his influence over the continuing shaping of rock and roll’s legacy in his role as a founding member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. In 2007, Peter Tork of the Monkees accused Wenner of abusing his power on the Hall’s board in the *New York Post*, saying, "[he] doesn't care what the rules are and just operates how he sees fit. It is an abuse of power."\(^{111}\)

Wenner’s interest in controlling the public’s historical memory of rock and roll is concerning, particularly because his influence is so significant and extensive. More questions need to be asked about the extent to which Wenner and *Rolling Stone* have controlled the story of classic rock in the popular memory. Additionally, academics should reexamine the way they use *Rolling Stone* as a primary source, lest the undue influence of Wenner over the story of rock music pass unexamined into the genre’s history.

Lester Bangs died of an overdose of cough syrup and cold medication in 1982 at age thirty-three. His early death made him a tragic and romantic figure in rock criticism, shrouding him with the mystique that is reserved for geniuses-gone-too-soon. He was beautifully eulogized by his colleagues, as in Robert Christgau’s farewell in the Village Voice:

It was Lester as much as anybody who defined what rock criticism ought to be—because he was the great one. He wasn't long on the values ordinarily sought in a critic—balance, consistency, analysis, judgment. But his writing was dense with the crazy, unschooled virtues of the music that moved him most deeply—again and again his conceits came from nowhere and hit some fundamental question right where it hurt. Finally, he asked too much of the world—that's why he wasn't long on balance, consistency, analysis, or judgment. But he made up for his lack of critical distance with his indefatigable sense of humor, and in the end, he was the most honest and sheerly gifted writer I've ever worked with—and one of the most honest and sheerly gifted I've ever read.112

Five years after he died, Greil Marcus cemented Bangs’ legacy with an excellent collection of his work, Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Music Critic. The book was critically and commercially successful.

Another collection, Mainlines, Bloodfeasts, and Bad Taste and a biography, Let It Blurt, have helped keep Bangs’ work visible over the years. In 2001, his portrayal by Phillip Seymour Hoffman in the hit movie Almost Famous introduced him as a legendary figure to a new, twenty-first century audience. His prestige is not merely a result of his early death; his work stands the test of time as first-rate cultural criticism.

His role in the history of rock criticism was to push rock music to remain vital and connected to its audience, something he feared was missing in the corporate rock context of the 1970s. He believed that authentic expression was the heart of rock and roll, and he promoted artists that he felt established a genuine connection with their audience through their emotional honesty. Although often self-contradictory—and always controversial—Bangs has become one of the most influential and admired of all rock critics. Embodying the spirit of rock in both style and taste, his writing was great art in its own right. Thus, it has remained highly relevant over the years.

The fortunes of rock and roll changed enormously over the period from 1966 to 1978, and they’ve changed even more since. Rock is no longer an embattled form, derided as worthless and degraded by cultural authorities. Major universities run courses on rock music commonly, and some of history and literature’s best minds have put their minds to explicating rock music and charting its historical development. In 2017, the ultimate validation of rock’s long struggle for respectability came when Bob Dylan was awarded a Nobel Prize in literature for his body of work.

“This is important art, pay attention,” demanded the early rock critics, and today there’s no doubt that they were right. In that sense, the purpose of rock criticism today is different from its earliest days. More than asserting the value of rock music, writing now is about policing the boundaries of good taste. As the subgenres of rock and pop continually multiply over the years, another focus of rock
critics has become sorting out and delineating the internal organization of the rock behemoth. With the internet, the amount of critical writing produced about music is immeasurable, an enormous change from fifty-one years ago, in 1966, when there was none. This makes it difficult to characterize the general nature of current rock criticism, which is vast and varies greatly in quality, style, and approach.

However different rock criticism is now from in its early days, it maintains the precepts introduced by the pioneers of the form in many ways. Many of today’s best rock critics read and were transformed by the work of Goldstein, Willis, Wenner, and Bangs, including Sasha Frere-Jones, Evie Nagy, and Ann Powers. The subjective voice and narrative forms that were borrowed from the New Journalism are still standard in rock writing. There is a continuing ideal of personalizing the musicians for their fans, and a focus on facilitating connections between audiences and the music. The best of rock criticism still, as it always has, tries to explain the political, cultural, and social meanings of rock music.

The early rock critics revolutionized cultural perceptions of rock and roll, and in the process permanently opened the doors of the cultural establishment to popular music. From the beginning, this was a part of a democratizing project of its first practitioners, who saw its dismissal by cultural authorities as elitism. By attacking unresponsive notions of cultural hierarchy and cultural institutions, rock critics joined others of their generation in challenging the status quo. In boosting rock’s respectability and visibility, the rock critics simultaneously amplified the effects of

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113 Conference, “Sex, Hope, and Rock and Roll.”
the music’s political and social content. They were the intellectual organizers of the rock revolution.

Before rock critics, rock music was not considered to be valid art by either the majority of the American public or by cultural authorities. In only a few years, the early rock critics changed that. But its widespread acceptance also permanently changed the nature of rock. By injecting the form in the mainstream, they also blunted some of the genre’s radical potential and challenging content.

There was no going back. For better or worse—or more likely both—these writers ensured that rock and roll ceased to be a marginalized subculture. Early rock critics like Richard Goldstein, Ellen Willis, Jann Wenner, and Lester Bangs were instrumental in moving rock and roll to the center of American cultural life.
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