



Rock's Back Pages

<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/>

Rupert Till

University of Huddersfield

r.till@hud.ac.uk

Rock's Back Pages is a music-focused online archive, mostly filled with interviews with musicians and music industry professionals. Finding primary source materials for popular music used to be a lengthy process of either collecting, for yourself, music magazines from Rolling Stone to NME and then reading back through them looking for the right article. Or if you were fortunate enough to be able to do so, to go to an archive where such materials might be found, and again spend long periods searching for the needle in the haystack that one required. Online academic search engines now allow you to search for examples of interviews with musicians and articles about them, but one is often swamped by reviews in newspapers, or if one puts the word 'rock' in the title, with geological results of little relevance to music. Searching for heavy metal will often produce information on abnormal load engineering and copper power cable, Prince comes up as actual royalty and Madonna it would seem is the mother of God, rather than a pop goddess.

As a musicologist, I am often interested in the opinions and thoughts of the musicians, composers and band members who created the music I am studying, to provide insight into the processes and agendas surrounding a piece of music. This is not always a key element of popular music studies, perhaps in part because classical musicology has been perceived as having deferred too routinely and deferentially to such opinions, ignoring critical perspectives, and in addition perhaps because such materials were difficult to come by. I have never managed to make it to archives such as those of the Institute of Popular Music at Liverpool University, so when I first came across the Rock's Back Pages (RBP) website I was immediately interested.

The site collects together articles from music based publications such as Billboard, Melody Maker, Creem, Mojo, NME, Q, Record Mirror, Smash Hits, Rolling Stone, Sounds, Trouser Press, Bass Player, Guitar Player, DJ Magazine, Mixmag, Kerrang, the Face and the Village Voice, as well as newspapers from the UK, USA and Australia. It also features audio material, mostly interviews with musicians.

Although no one would claim that the opinions of those who create popular music is the only source of truth as to what such music means, composers and performers do have a unique insight into the world of popular music, and inevitably have much of use and of interest to say. The list of sources in Rock's Back Pages is largely focused on artists from Britain and the United States. One criticism and possible future avenue for development for the site would be to expand its range of sources to include other countries. There are some German sources, but Japan and France stick out as being somewhat bypassed by the site, despite being large music industry markets with what the IFPI tells us is five percent or more of world market share of sales. RBP is mainly

an English language site, so its focus is understandable, but one would hope that in the future it might begin to diversify.

The site is easy to use and search, but it is not, as of yet, complete. For example when looking into 'Like a Prayer' for my book *Pop Cult* (2010), I tried to find interviews with Madonna about the song from the time that the record was released, surrounded by controversy over the video for the song, to the extent that the Vatican condemn it. Despite that RBP lists both *Esquire* and *Smash Hits* as part of its archive, interviews with Madonna in those magazines from that year did not show up in my searches, and in the end I had to rely on a Madonna fan site, www.allaboutmadonna.com that has reprinted almost every interview Madonna has given. This turned up interviews and quotes that gave me exactly the information I was seeking, neatly presented with magazine cover shots, and (probably copyright breaking) interview transcriptions, without having to weed out opinion pieces and reviews of albums from my searches.

This illustrates the good and the bad points of RBP. The fan site I turned to for information on Madonna is hardly an ideal source, with no stable URL and the potential for questions over its accuracy. RBP gives stable URLs for references and since it has been constructed by a mixture of academic, journalistic and publishing interests, one can be pretty sure that its material is accurate. But the article I needed was simply not there. RBP is still an archive that is growing and it needs still to fill in gaps in its records, perhaps because it has only been able to find particular back copies of magazines or because it has only been able to digitize a certain level of information. Some small adjustments, like filters to exclude or select for example interviews or reviews, would be useful.

Conclusions about the site are straight forward, RBP is an excellent first point of call if researching a popular music subject, but one should not assume it has every reference to press articles and the like. It is a limited resource, more in terms of geography and cultural diversity than that it misses the odd Madonna article. However it is a highly useful resource as well as being highly entertaining for anyone with even a moderate interest in popular music, so I would recommend it as a site all readers of this journal would benefit from investigating, whether for work or pleasure. Some content is free but it does charge for full access - institutional membership is available to libraries for example.