



Art to Commerce: The Trajectory of Popular Music Criticism

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a content and textual analysis of popular music criticism from the 1960s to the 2000s to discern the extent to which criticism has shifted focus from matters of music to matters of business. In part, we believe such a shift to be due likely to increased awareness among journalists and fans of the industrial nature of popular music production, distribution and consumption, and to the disruption of the music industry that began in the late 1990s with the widespread use of the Internet for file sharing. Searching and sorting the Rock's Backpages database of over 22,000 pieces of music journalism for keywords associated with the business, economics and commercial aspects of popular music, we found several periods during which popular music criticism's focus on business-related concerns seemed to have increased. The article discusses possible reasons for the increases as well as methods for analyzing a large corpus of popular music criticism texts.

Keywords: music journalism, popular music criticism, rock criticism, Rock's Backpages

Though scant scholarship directly addresses this subject, music journalists and bloggers have identified a trend in recent years toward commerce-specific framing when writing about artists, recording and performance. Most music journalists, according to Willoughby (2011), "are writing quasi shareholder reports that chart the movements of artists' commercial careers" instead of artistic criticism. While there may be many reasons for such a trend, such as the Internet's rise to prominence not only as a medium for distribution of music but also as a medium for distribution of information *about* music, might it be possible to discern such a trend? Our goal with the research reported here was an attempt to empirically determine whether such a trend exists and, if so, the extent to which it does.

Literature Review

This observation made a decade ago is still valid: "little has been published about popular-music criticism, in popular-music scholarship or in journalism and mass communication scholarship" (Jones 2002b: 1), partly because the subject is large and the body of writing fairly unorganized and only loosely archived (McLeod 2001). The studies of popular music criticism that have been published thus far focus on individual critics (Avery 2011; Bonomo 2012; DeRogatis 2000, to name just a few), on media (Williams 2002), and on the sociological and journalistic dimensions of criticism (Jones 2002a; Lindberg et al. 2005). To our knowledge, no empirical studies have been undertaken that examine a large corpus of popular music criticism as a means of revealing larger trends and cultural shifts in the popular understanding of the role of

music as an artistic and commercial endeavor. Such shifts have occurred throughout the history of post-WWII popular music (both in popular discourse — as artists, record labels and publishers increasingly have sold rights to music to be used in advertising — and in scholarly discourse, for example Stratton 1982 and Klein 2008). As Jones and Featherly noted, one prominent shift occurred in the 1960s, when “the lyrical content of popular music itself forced critics to confront social issues and go beyond aesthetics to explore the ways in which meaning is made from popular music” (2002: 21).

While rock criticism in the United States did not fully develop until the mid-1960s (Gudmundsson et al. 2002; Jones 2002b; McLeod 2001; Powers 2009), reportage and criticism of popular music began as early as the 1930s, when the educated middle class embraced jazz (Frith 1988; Gennari 1991). Early journalism on pop and rock “concentrated on sales figures” (“Popular Music Criticism” 2003) and “amounted to little more than news and gossip” (Gudmundsson et al. 2002: 41). Much of the foundational vocabulary of modern pop criticism lies in the brief reviews of pop and rock records originally in trade magazines such as *Billboard* and *Cashbox*: “The shrewd reviewers of those papers were masters at identifying for each record its musical style, its ancestors and influences, the merit of its performance, and the likelihood of its commercial success” (Ennis 1992 as quoted in McLeod 2001: 48). It should be noted that both *Billboard* and *Cashbox*, in their very names, served as purveyors of news to those working in the music business, and as such focused very much, if not exclusively, on the commercial aspects of popular music, from sales figures to charts to executive comings and goings.

Around the same time that *Billboard* and *Cashbox* rose to prominence, the Grammys were born. First proposed in 1955 as a “Walk of Fame” in Hollywood, the organization that in 1957 became the Grammy-granting National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences exemplified the industry’s initial tug-of-war between commercial and artistic outcomes as markers of success. When executives from the largest record companies at the time (Columbia, MGM, Capitol, Decca and RCA) discussed the possibility of recognizing and awarding musical merit, the only criterion for bestowing any honors they were able to agree on was sales figures; to be eligible for nomination, a singer would have to have sold at least a quarter million records (Watson and Anand 2006). But in formalizing the NARAS, Columbia Records chief Paul Weston sought “a proper means for rewarding people on an artistic level” (Schipper 1992 as quoted in Watson and Anand 2006: 42) and initially

only “creatives” — comprising recording artists, conductors, songwriters and engineers — had the right to constitute committees that would consider nominations for the awards, as well as the right to vote for the winners. ... The new NARAS organisation embodied one key ideal: the Grammy awards would be based on artistic merit alone. ... sales would not be the yardstick. (Watson and Anand 2006: 42)

However, as Watson and Anand’s study concludes, the resulting Grammy Awards — hand in hand with the music press — became a powerful tool within the industry to influence its own commercial goals, regardless of artistic merit. The subsequent media spotlight of a Grammy nomination, and especially a win, juiced an artist’s record sales. That turnabout became directly reflected in the journalism, where “discourse about sales quadrupled ... in *Billboard*’s reporting on the Grammy awards in 1985-1994” (Watson and Anand 2006: 49).

As music criticism evolved in the 1960s, it was welcomed within the U.S. underground press — “exemplified by the early publications, *Village Voice*, *LA Free Press* and *Berkeley Barb*” (McLeod 2001: 49) — and formed the core of countercultural magazines such as *Crawdaddy!* (started in 1966), *Rolling Stone* magazine (1967) and *Creem* (1969) (Christgau 2004; Gudmundsson et al. 2002), largely because rock music itself “turned out to be the basic form of underground culture” (Frith 1983: 168). These countercultural outlets gave burgeoning rock critics “the leniency to write as they wished, but also met their political needs” and extended a modernist focus on “progressive aesthetic values as well as the celebration of superior talent” (Powers 2009: 324). Rock criticism in these

media was developing alongside New Journalism, which colored rock criticism with similar shades of narrative form and vibrant, often subjective description (Pauly 1990). Most of these values manifested in Lester Bangs, “the rock critic par excellence” and “quite possibly the diametric opposite of the professional, ethically responsible journalist” (Powers 2009: 328), and the zenith of rock criticism’s anti-commercial first phase.

In this period, music criticism began do to “more than analyze music” (Jones 2002b: 2), linking songs and albums to discussions of social issues and politics. Canonization within the genre began, based primarily on the criteria of authenticity, excitement and the jolt of new forms of expression (Christgau 2004: 142). An emerging “ideology of rock” was built also on concepts of artistic form and community (Frith 1983), and writers advocated that rock music deserved serious discussion based on its dealings with those sociological factors (Powers 2009). This, in turn, nurtured an inevitable “ideology of rock criticism”, which “valorises serious, masculine ‘authentic’ rock and dismisses trivial, feminine ‘prefabricated’ pop music” (McLeod 2001: 47). Sales figures, chart position, career milestones, etc. were not as important to these rock critics.

Amid this establishment of rock criticism — and, without diving into the rockist vs. popoptimist debate of the last decade, we are careful to ascribe this early form of criticism as “rock criticism” and the broader form that comes later as “pop criticism” — the self-proclaimed Dean of American Rock Critics, Robert Christgau, noted music journalism’s split into two distinct branches: the “rock press,” which concentrated on objective reporting of the music industry and its products, and the “rock critics” who produced more “intellectual” commentary (Christgau 1976).¹ Christgau saw himself firmly on the critic side, yet Christgau’s approach to record reviewing paved the way for an eventual trend. His column was titled “Consumer Guide” (1969–2006 in the *Village Voice*, 2006–2010 online at <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/>) and featured dense single-paragraph record reviews, each letter-graded for quick and easy purchasing advice, a commercial-centric approach but in line with Christgau’s belief in “intelligent consumption” (“Popular Music Criticism” 2003). Christgau was the first major critic to examine pop music within its context as a commodity. As a result of this methodology of interrogating records “through their economy”, Christgau “evolved music criticism into service journalism” (Powers 2008: 241–242; see also Powers 2013).

Frith later divided rock criticism’s two camps differently but with a notable assumption of consumerism. Some media outlets, he said, were “consumer guides for adults”, concentrating on the foundational rock criticism values of music as an experience, and others are “consumer guides for teenagers”, advocating for music that reinforces a celebration of youth (1983: 177). The consumerist approach caught on as music criticism spread into daily newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s, with “hardboiled middlebrow” editors looking to the *Billboard* charts for guidance in news judgment, and eventually a transformation there from “arts coverage” to “entertainment guide” took hold at mainstream newspapers and spread back to the alternative press, as well (Christgau 2004: 142-143). By the 1990s the flagrant consumerism highlighted in hip-hop music helped the consumer-guide approach flourish within that genre (Fenster 2002). Meanwhile, in popular magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, the consumer-leaning discourse became one that “promotes the sense that one’s participation in rock and roll ... begins and ends at the point at which we decide whether or not to purchase a record or a ticket to a show. *Engagement is equated with consumption*” (Fenster 2002: 85, our emphasis).

When the consumer-guide approach is taken too far, the result is an “obsession with dates, charts, and lists” as satirized in Nick Hornby’s novel *High Fidelity* and identified by scholar David Sanjek as a divergent strain of music journalism he calls “quantification” (1997: 76): “Cultural practice becomes calculated bean-counting”, he writes (1997: 77), but he adds that merely tallying sales — commodifying the music — actually assists in creating social agreement about what music is actually “popular”. He cites Ken Barnes’ assertions about the necessary evil of charts and playlists as

a system driven by consensus, and though producing its weaknesses and abuses that stem from any consensus (herd mentality, reluctance to experiment, attempted manipulation), it's still ... as close to the will of the people in action as you'll find in any communications medium. (as quoted in Sanjek 1997: 78)

By the 1990s, particularly in England, the dominant music magazines, such as *Q*, *Mojo* and *The Wire*, applied the same list-making approach to create their own charts, filling many of their covers with feature headlines such as “100 Greatest Singles of All Time” (*Mojo*, Aug. 1997), “100 Records That Set the World on Fire” (*The Wire*, Sept. 1998), “The Best Gigs Ever” (*Q*, Sept. 1996) and “1,010 Songs You Must Own!” (*Q*, Sept. 2004). This non-bylined, anonymous content focused more on information, history, gossip and puns and thus represented a consumerist return to a “precritical state of precriticism” (Lindberg et al. 2005: 274).

But eventually, the tenuous relationship between artistic success and commercial achievement begins to be reckoned with more directly, with Christgau himself observing that Jon Landau's declaration of Bruce Springsteen rock's wunderkind — even though the article itself “probably didn't sell 10,000 LPs directly” — “can justly be said to have engendered a star” (Christgau 1976). In Britain, where weekly music magazines established dominance in the 1970s, evincing a culture “somewhere between Fleet Street and an undergraduate common room” (Harris 2009), Chris Charlesworth said of his tenure at *Melody Maker* (recognizing the aforementioned sales impact the Grammys would identify shortly thereafter), “We could stick an unknown artist on the front page, and their album would go into the charts the following week if we said it was good. We had a lot of power” (Lindberg et al. 2005: 19). The commercial impact of pop music critics might pale next to radio and MTV,

but this does not mean critics have no influence. Even though they are not the only gatekeepers, rock critics are nevertheless gatekeepers that influence others and articulate the attitudes of their peers by concretely putting them into writing. (McLeod 2001: 57)

The commercial impact of critics, though, is perhaps impossible to measure (Jones 2002b), and Roy Shuker has noted that “there is general agreement that rock critics don't exercise as much influence on consumers as, say, literary or drama critics” (1994: 93). That said, rock and pop critics became an almost inextricable part of the pop music industry — a key player in the promotional and marketing cycle of records and tours. Critics function at least partially within the economy of the music industry itself (Fenster 2002), and the resulting symbiotic relationship has allowed the pop music industry to cater to rock and pop critics by providing them with records and tickets, and the critics responded by offering publicity (Lindberg et al. 2005). While a “sense of distance” has been maintained in the name of journalistic integrity and objectivity, “at the same time the need of the industry to constantly sell new images, styles, and product is met” (Shuker 1998: 200). The resulting “structural influence” of the industry (advertisers) on media (newspapers and magazines) is not a direct, individual or quantifiable (Jones 1993) influence (for example payola), but a broader effect resulting in media that create “supportive environments” for the commercial goals of the industry (Turow 1992: 88). In extreme cases, “the sympathetic ties to the music industry that are essential to accurate criticism can develop into restrictive bonds” (Christgau 1976).

The result is that music criticism itself became industrialized. Whether its industrialization is reflected directly in its content is an interesting question and one that it might be possible to answer by examining a large corpus of published criticism over time. At the level of content, Mark Evans, in a study of album reviews in Australian rock magazines, found that album reviews “are constituted by fundamental elements that can be individually identified ... lyrical analysis, inter-artist comparison, artist background and musical analysis” (1998: 49). At an institutional level, Mark Fenster noted that “the music press has become conventionalized and based upon the same kinds of industrial structures” as the music industry (1989: 16). One hypothesis that drove our inquiry is that if critics have indeed over time come to work (at least) in semi-service to the music

industry, then they are likely to be using more of the industry's terminology and perspective in writing about music.

Method

Recent research in the area of digital humanities (Argamon and Olsen 2009; Piotrowski 2012) provides a template and inspiration for our work. We used the corpus of criticism at the Rock's Backpages website (<http://www.rocksbackpages.com>) for our analyses. As of May 2013 the site contains over 22,000 articles from five decades of popular music criticism from sources including, among others, *Punk*, *Trouser Press*, *Bomp*, *Creem*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *New Musical Express (NME)*, *Uncut*, and *Mojo*, and numerous fanzines. The articles in the database are full-text and range from short album or concert reviews to feature stories and extended interviews. It should be noted that Rock's Backpages is not a complete collection of popular music criticism, and is driven largely by journalists' own submissions of their writing and collections, as well as by its founder, Barney Hoskyns, a journalist. It is the largest such data collection extant. It is almost entirely popular music criticism written in English by U.K. and U.S. critics. By mining the data (namely the reviews and interviews from the aforementioned sources) at the website we sought to discover, analyze and visualize the trends and shifts in popular music criticism in the U.S. and U.K. (the countries whose periodicals are predominant in the Rock's Backpages database - Hoskyns is based in the U.K., and it is possible that U.K. critics are therefore overrepresented in the database). Wilson (2003) undertook a somewhat similar study to perform a content analysis of reviews on the Pitchfork music website, but the goal was an experiment to engage in songwriting that reflected the tastes found to be statistically significant among Pitchfork reviewers. By contrast, we particularly sought to determine the presence and trajectory of a general shift from a focus on the aesthetics of popular music to a focus on its commercial aspects, and thereby illuminate the growing awareness and skepticism of critics, and by corollary fans, concerning the mixture of art and commerce entangled in popular music.

We began a quantitative content analysis by searching the Rock's Backpages database for keywords we believed to be frequently associated with the music business (Table 1). For the resulting articles we captured publication name, author name, publication date, and full text of the article.

Table 1. Keywords frequently associated with the business of music.

Advertisement	Consumer	Gold Record	Recoup
Advertiser	Consumption	Industry	Recoupable
Advertising	Contract	Internet	Revenue
Box office	Copyright	Management	Sales
Break even	Corporate	Market	Sell out
Budget	Corporation	Marketability	Selling
Business	Economics	Marketing	Selling out
Chart	Economy	Merchandise	Sellout
Chart-topper	Expense	Payola	Sold out
Chart-topping	Finance	Percentage	Sponsor
Commerce	Financial	Product	Sponsorship
Commercial	First-week	Profitable	Tax
Commerciality	Go Gold	Promoter	Taxes
Commercialization	Gold	Promotion	Units

After scanning for duplicate database articles, we examined the frequency of occurrence of the keywords over time. We then sampled text from the years within which trends were apparent to undertake a textual analysis to determine the context within which frequently occurring keywords were appearing in an effort to interpret the circumstances and meanings within which critics were writing about these terms.

Results

Summing the outcome of keyword searches results in 36,810 instances of articles with one or more of the keywords for which we searched. Portraying the frequency of those keywords in a chart yields an interesting graphic, showing that the number of occurrences of business-related keywords in published criticism rose sharply during the 1970s, peaked in the mid-1970s, and leveled off during the 1980s and 1990s (Figure 1). Combining the results from Chart 1 with a plot of the total number of articles in the

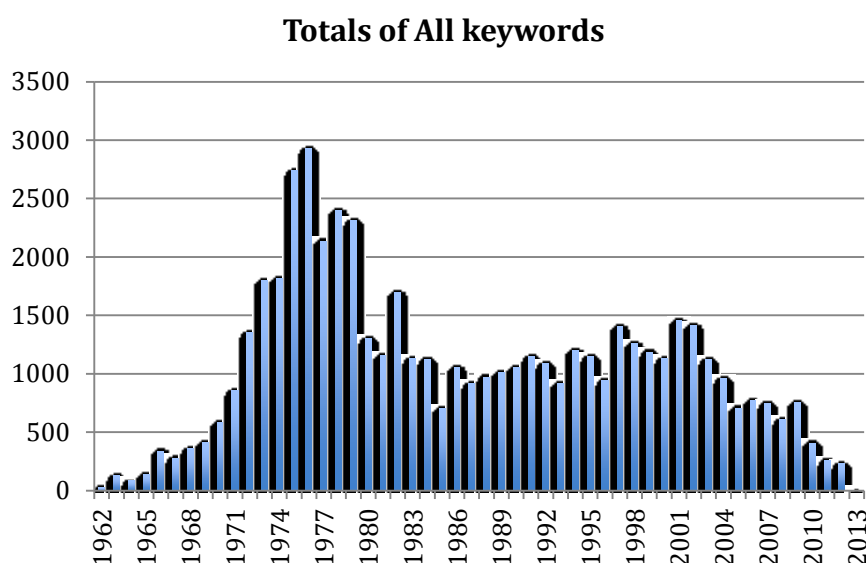


Figure 1. Frequency of all keywords, 1962–2013.

Rock's Backpages database each year (Figure 2) shows particularly interesting moments at which business-related terms became more prevalent. There is clearly a rise in business-related keywords during the 1970s, a sharp, but short, rise around 1980, a steady increase from the early 1980s on with other sharp but short increases around 1997 and 2000.

We hypothesize that the first increase in the 1970s came as the realization that popular music is big business grew along with the visible excesses of 1970s rock stardom. The increase around 1979–1980 was likely due to the critique of the aforementioned 1970s excesses during and just after the heyday of punk rock. And, finally, the bursts in use of business-related keywords around 1997 and 2000 were likely due to increased interest in file-sharing, mp3 and Napster.

Notably some keywords showed extraordinary spikes in occurrence in 2000 by comparison to mid-1970s peaks, such as “sales”, “selling” (combined in Figure 3), “market” (and variants such as “marketing”, Figure 4), “industry” (Figure 5), and “commerce” (and variants such as “commercial”, Figure 6). This seems to indicate that topics associated with innovations in online file-sharing, like Napster, were pre-eminent in critics' writing, and that they were likely reporting on concerns shared by musicians and the music industry.

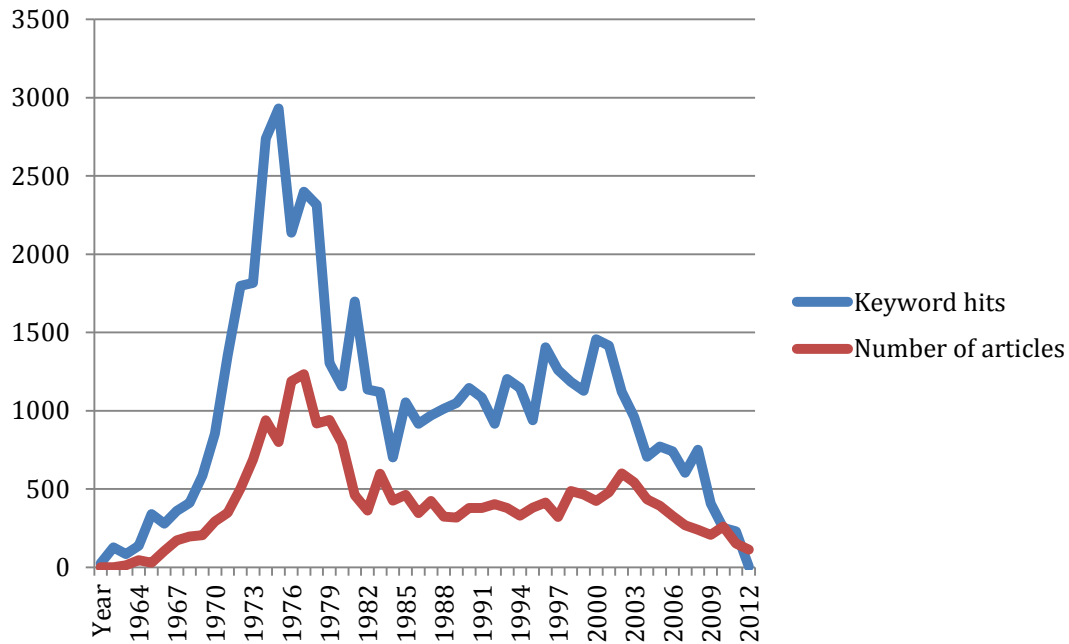


Figure 2. Keyword occurrences and articles in database, 1962–2013.

Phrases such as, “the industry has responded with a tizzy of lawsuits” against Napster (Weisbard 2000a) account for many mentions of the “industry” keyword in our data. A month earlier, Eric Weisbard wrote an article in *The New York Times*, flagged in our data for 11 uses of the term “industry”, looking back on the 1990s and noting that while “the music industry opened its doors to all comers” it also resulted in considerable “corporate consolidation” (2000c). “The music industry ... got small”, notes another writer (Roberts 2000), as critics were observing the music business’ contraction, which began with a widespread series of layoffs and cutbacks in 1999. Another reason for the 2000 spike lies with a critic’s annual chore: the year-end retrospective. In 2000, critical hindsight involved summing up 1999, the 1990s, the 20th century and, for the bold ones, the millennium, which often meant making some comment, directly or indirectly, on the music business as a whole. Thus, the Y2K spike.

Totals of "Sales", "Selling"

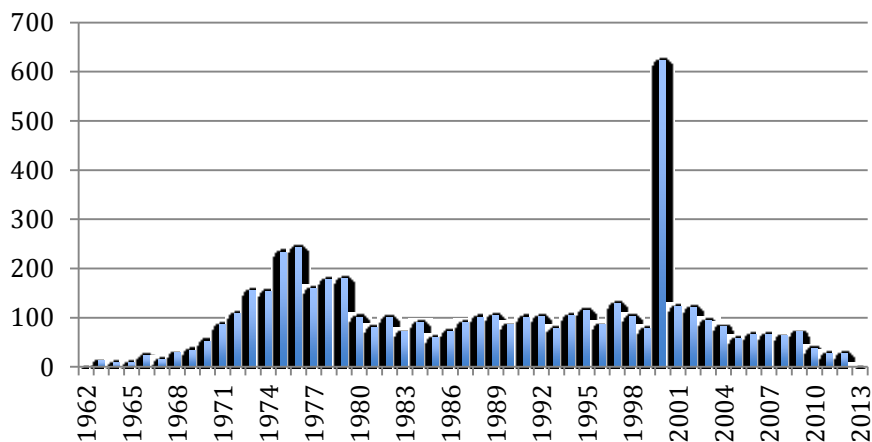


Figure 3. Frequency of keywords “sales”, “selling”, 1962–2013.

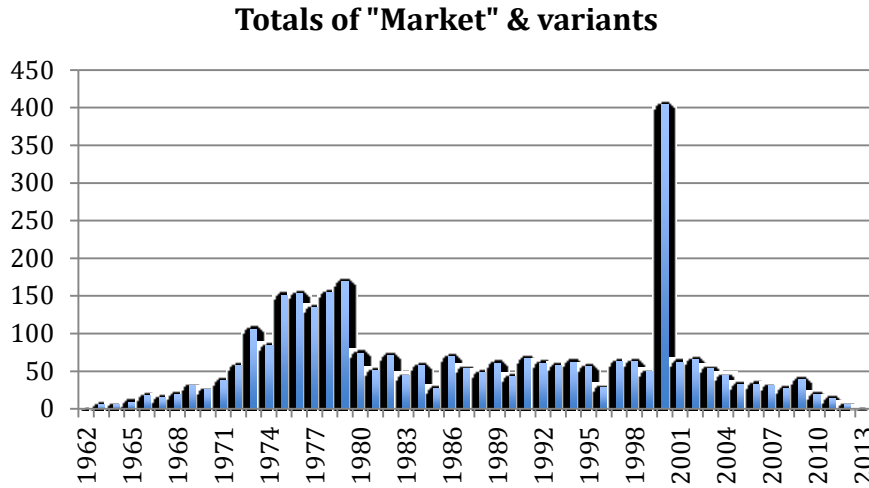


Figure 4. Frequency of keywords “market”, “marketing”, “marketable”, 1962–2013.

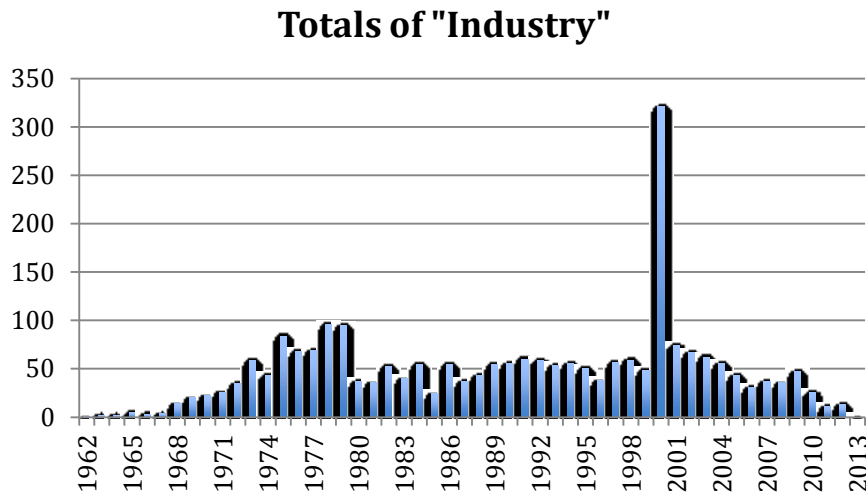


Figure 5. Frequency of keyword “industry”, 1962–2013.

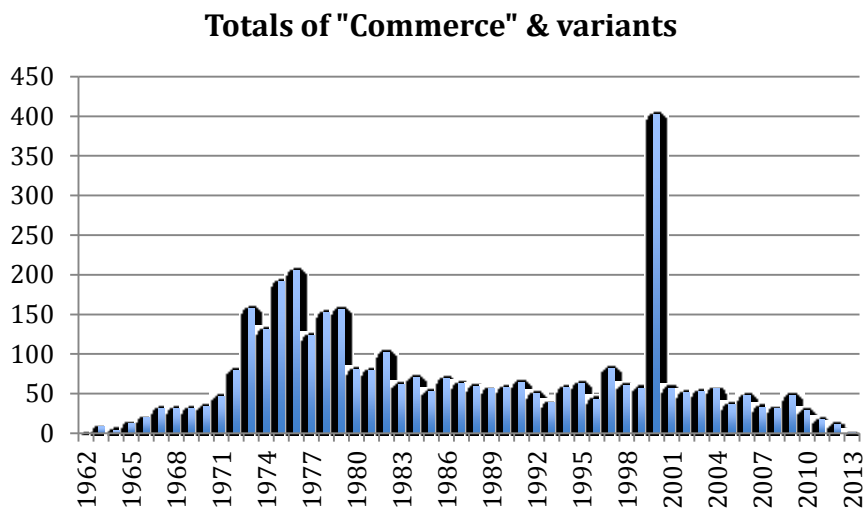


Figure 6. Frequency of keywords “commerce”, “commercial”, “commerciality”, “commercialization”, 1962–2013.

Interestingly, the keyword “copyright” does not show up very often in any of the years from 1962–2013, occurring in only 221 instances, though it, too, spikes briefly during 2000 (Figure 7). Mentions of “internet” are similarly infrequent, with 317 mentions across all years (the greatest number of mentions, 64, occurring in 2000), while mp3 appears a scant 33 times.

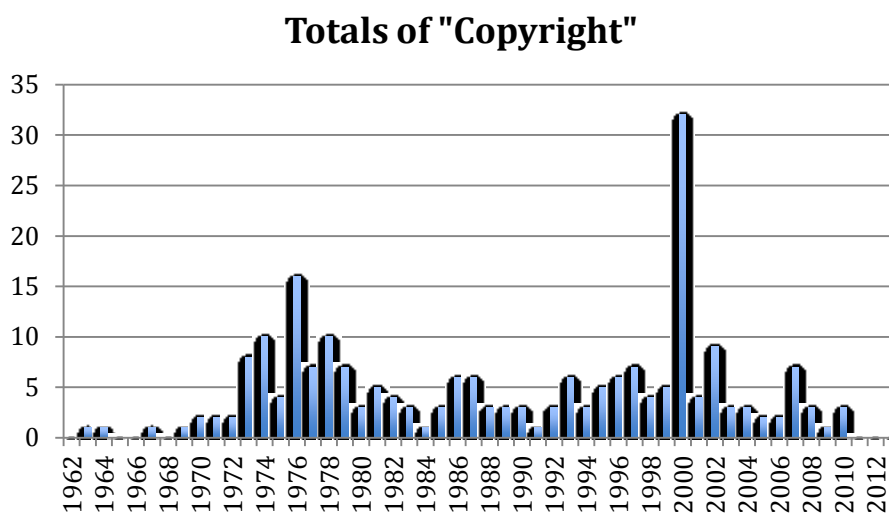


Figure 7. Frequency of keyword “copyright”, 1962–2013.

And “Napster” itself appears only 22 times, beginning in 2000, with 6 mentions each in 2000 and 2001. The relative lack of mentions of those terms likely means that they served as a lever, or wedge, for discussion of their consequences, thus “sparking” an increase in keywords such as “sales”, “market” and “commerce”, for instance, but they were not the focus of critics’ attention. For example, another Weisbard article later in 2000 situates Napster in the context of mass media and pop culture generally, noting that “Napster has to be understood in consumer terms, pop terms, not just tech and legal terms” (2000b), and goes on to discuss album sales, LPs, and so on. Even in an article such as that one, new media are contextualized within the old, and the old get the greater attention.

Comparing the use of “sales” in texts from 1980 and 2000 — two pivotal, end-of-era years in history that shared cultural fixations with both retrospective of the past and prediction of the future, as well as similar apocalyptic outlooks on the latter (*The End All Around Us: Apocalyptic Texts and Popular Culture* 2009) — one finds the mention of sales figures prominent in two different contexts. In 2000, among the raw data for the search term “sales”, commercial figures are mentioned in a historical, retrospective context (usually as a biographical bullet point, noting an upturn or, less frequently, downturn in an artist’s previous career) in 61 percent of the articles. Among the same raw data subset, in 1980 figures are mentioned in the context of current artists (citing recent commercial milestones or, in a way, justification for the article) in 76 percent of the articles.

It is perhaps not surprising that more retrospective articles would have been published in 2000, both because of the occasion of the century/millennium transition and because pop music itself by that point simply had two decades more history to mention as exposition as well as evaluate. Throughout the texts, however, there is a clear commonality to the deployment of the keyword “sales”, for instance. An artist’s record sales are noted almost always as a demarcation line for commercial accomplishment vs. artistic credibility.

In the 1970s, a greater awareness of — and comment on — the machinery of pop production seems to seep into the pop music press. Simon Frith's 1973 evaluation of that year's pop singles heralded the place of commercial input into the overall impact of music — an early admission of the complicated interrelationships between art and commerce on the road to success: "It's not a simple matter of aesthetics or commerce or taste or fashion but a complicated mixture of all these things" (1992: 487). For many critics and artists, though, the division between art and commerce was less complicated and more starkly black and white. In recalling his days writing for Britain's *NME* music magazine, specifically in the year 1973, Charles Shaar Murray was direct in expressing his Marxist/rockist revolutionary ideals: "Our ethos was straightforward: power to the people. The people in question being our readers, who had first call on our loyalty. We despised the record industry; gave not even two hoots for the sensitivities of our publisher or the profits of their shareholders, and relentlessly satirised even favourite musicians ..." (2000). Artist Neil Young is quoted in a 2000 retrospective describing the 1974 tour of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young as "a huge money trip ... the exact antithesis of what all those people are idealistically trying to see in their heads when they come to see us play" (Hoskyns 2000). By 1980, *Trouser Press* critic Ira Robbins wrote a retrospective of "those fabulous seventies", noting just how clearly sales figures were being applied to set certain musicians apart as different — and artistically less credible — than the authenticity typically hailed by rock critics since the 1960s:

While the new wave was setting everything to rights in England (1976-78), the American record industry was caught up in a near-fatal merry-go-round of seemingly limitless platinummania. Some very familiar bands began selling LPs in unprecedented quantities, surprising all except perhaps record companies who were quick to claim credit for effective marketing strategies. Fleetwood Mac, Peter Dinklage, Steve Miller, Bob Seger and a few others had been struggling for a decade or more each, with little hope of success. Suddenly, each shifted direction towards the middle of the road and began collecting royalty checks fit for royalty. At the same time, record companies' newly refined sales forces and techniques turned some (relatively) new names — Meatloaf, Boston, Heart, Eddie Money — and the revived Bee Gees into tremendously successful commodities. (Robbins 1980)

Christgau later cited "the circa-1976 advent of punk" as resulting in the anointing of the Velvet Underground as a seminal band — despite their lack of sales — a moment which he called "a crucial paradigm shift" (2004: 142). The increase in business-related keywords hints at the heated debate that resulted in this overt conclusion. The texts here throughout the years continue debating "the degree that record sales connote cultural significance" (Lewis 2000), and consistently stress the value of artistic influence that can be had despite lower comparative commercial success: Warren Zevon's "influence long ago leapt past his sales" (Hasted 2000), and another article goes to great lengths to list the praise of peers and Beatlesque cultural stature of the guitar pop band Big Star before noting their commercial context: "Not bad for a record that shifted a grand total of 4,000 units when it was released in 1974" (Lester 2000a). In 2000, new artists were discussed in terms of sales being a milestone instead of a millstone — a profile of Skin, singer for the punk band Skunk Anansie, mentions that her refusal "to be toned down or made 'acceptable' ... hasn't hindered sales" (O'Brien 2000), and the rising celebrity status of DJ Moby is sarcastically cast against his artistic credibility (Lester 2000b) — while mid-career artists are held up as an example of the very art vs. commerce struggle. A 2000 profile of rapper Eminem suggests his 10 million records sold should function as a panacea for his personal woes that year, but then suggests the other side of that sword: "Because with almost ten million album sales to his name, Eminem is caught in a vicious circle: the more pop success he enjoys, the harder he must work to prove his white-trash gangsta cred" (Dalton 2000). By 2000, Oasis guitarist Noel Gallagher is asked directly about which he'd rather have, the sales or the street-cred. No surprise, he'd like both, and he's quoted still framing the issue in the same terms:

In an ideal world. I'd rather be like The Velvet Underground, who didn't sell anything, ever. I'm sure Lou Reed's pretty proud of what he's done, as he should be, because he's done

some fucking good stuff. When you meet these people, the likes of Mercury Rev, and you go, 'Fucking great album,' they always go, 'Fucking wish it would sell a few more.' That's always their opening line. To make great records and to sell 50 million would be brilliant. (Lester 2000c)

An artistic bane but logistically necessary evil, as recognized by artist and critic — a “complicated mixture” as Frith said — the Fall’s Mark E. Smith says in one interview, trailing off, “Sales figures are so ...” (Penman 1980).

Meanwhile, in retrospective articles, commercial language and citations are most often used to justify the superiority of longevity. An article about the band Chicago — an observation of their 34th year together, an odd number for an observance, though the article’s chief *raison d’être* is the occasion of the century’s end — cites record sales of 120 million as justification for further artistic efforts (Kruger 2000). In order to communicate the “brain-boggling hugeness” of Metallica, one writer builds up the band’s “colossal” sales as directly proportional to its “bludgeoning, mind-warping muse” (Fortnam 2000). Amid the data’s slight millennial spike are reports from 2000 of David Bowie becoming his own bank, earning £34 million based not on sales of new records but via the sale of investments based on “the potential sales of his future releases” (O’Hagan 2000).

A couple of articles illustrate the shift most starkly. A 2000 profile of singer Rod Stewart establishes the subject’s cultural significance with a breathless array of commercial citations, chart positions and sales figures, including a Bowie-esque sale of future earnings:

His golden-oldies album, ‘The Story So Far: the Very Best of Rod Stewart,’ reached No 7 in the UK over Christmas and is still selling briskly. Since terminating his contract with Warner Bros records – by mutual consent, he insists – he has signed with Clive Davis’s ‘happening’ J label and seen his 1969 track ‘Handbags and Gladrags’ turn into a chart-topper for the Stereophonics. He’s just back from Cyprus where he performed at the £5m birthday party of the BHS tycoon Philip Green. He may be a stranger to the contemporary singles charts, but still ranks as a mega-earner on the level of his old friends and rivals Elton John and David Bowie. Recently he sold his future royalties for an estimated £15m to the Japanese banking group Nomura. With an income of around £8m last year, he rates No 17 in OK! Magazine’s top 100 show-business plutocrats. This month, he starts his first British tour for three years, a ‘summer of Rod’ that will include concerts at Edinburgh and Warwick Castles and an appearance at the Queen’s golden jubilee concert at Buckingham Palace. (Norman 2000)

In the course of that article, writer Philip Norman recalls, as a means of contrast, an interview he did with Stewart in 1973. That article, also in our data (for the keyword “promoter”, but only because someone’s career title was mentioned offhand), finds Norman using significantly different means to impress Stewart’s importance upon us. The piece is a rhapsodic profile of Stewart’s band, the Faces, and the cultural impact of their music and burgeoning celebrity. Instead of sales figures — there would have been plenty to cite, as this incarnation of the band had already released four albums — Norman waxes rhapsodic on Stewart’s raw talent and performance skills in passages like this:

“And the voice! From the over-sized larynx in his narrow chest the voice rises, already on its knees: there are broken bottles in it, cigarettes and many last gasps, though his songs are of blue skies, hot days, innocent things. Sometimes in the changing lights he will appear next to the guitarist Ronnie Wood, both of them jumping up and down like little girls with a skipping-rope; or he will lie prostrate, kick his football, even wander off the stage altogether”. (1974)

Another way to visualize these keywords is to create “word clouds” based on the frequency of occurrence. The resulting illustrations illuminate the relative importance of each term. Figure 8 shows the relative dominance of the keyword “business” in relation to the others, while Figure 9 removes the dominant keyword “business” to better illustrate the presence of other keywords.



Figure 8. Keyword word cloud, 1962–2013.



Figure 9. Keyword word cloud without keyword “business”, 1962–2013.

The relative size of the keywords in the word cloud represents their frequency and shows their prevalence in comparison to the other words. The dominance of the most prevalent keywords, “business” and “chart”, is quite visibly apparent.

Conclusion

In an analysis of the shrinking influence of British music magazines, John Harris, a columnist for the U.K.’s *Guardian* newspaper, and himself a music journalist who began his career at *Sounds* in the U.K., quotes rock critic Greil Marcus:

Mostly, when you read about musicians, *what’s being reviewed is their career, not their work*: how is this record going to contribute to the building of their audience, or their ability to reclaim an audience that’s been lost? (Harris 2009, our emphasis)

Harris attributes the focus on audience and market to a lack of artistic merit demanding better criticism, writing that, “in the absence of enough creative substance, you too often end up with writing that reflects the empty stuff of commerce”. He also perceives a surrender by writers to the ease with which new media allows fans to bypass the words of critics and click straight through and actually hear and judge the music for themselves. As he puts it, “when the main event is only a click away, there isn’t always much point to rhapsodies or forensic critiques”. It is too soon to know whether such a shift is under way in contemporary popular music criticism since the rise of the internet, but it is clear that by examining a large corpus of popular music criticism we can discern trends over time that gives insight into the constituent elements of critic discourse.

Our findings are thus a first step toward mining a rich set of texts reflecting the content, concerns, tastes and styles of over 50 years of popular music criticism. How much does it matter what critics talk about? It is unlikely research could answer that question, and it is not one that we sought to answer. However, we do believe that our research shows that popular music criticism can be considered a barometer of popular discourse about popular music. Critics try at least in part to represent fans, and fans' interests. They also try to act as journalists, to report on people, places and trends they believe significant. They also seek not only to follow trends but also in some cases to set the agenda for what is popular, trendy and talked about. In addition, critics themselves are influenced by the discourse surrounding popular music, as well as by the discourse within the circles in which they work. The professionalization of popular music criticism is an important context within which to consider our results, as it is undoubtedly the case that critics talk with other critics, editors, and publishers in addition to musicians, fans, and numerous representatives of the music industry, particularly publicists.

The direction of business-related keywords appears empirically to back up the claim by Sanjek that popular music criticism "began as little more than a branch of publicity" (1992: 13). Indeed, the 1960s reflect few uses of the keywords for which we searched. It would be interesting to examine individual critics' articles over time, or those of a single publication, for example, and understand the critical tendencies, particularly between the oft-juxtaposed poles of art and commerce, or authenticity and manufacture. Indeed, an analysis such as the one we have performed provides an opportunity for new theories concerning art and commerce. As Stratton (1982: 283) noted:

Hits are in the first place popular records, but in the second place they are commercial. The 'good' and the 'commercial' with all its rational capitalist implications are, therefore, still kept radically separate. Paradoxically it is the radical separation of these two sets of criteria which allows the 'output' end of the industry to resolve the problem of the relationship between them so successfully. 'Art' and commercialism are articulated as two separate domains by music journalists. Consequently one domain may be discussed with the intrusion of the other. The result is an ideological resolution of a real economic conflict.

From what we have discerned in the data it does seem that while art and commerce are intertwined in critics' discourse, which is unsurprising, the ratio between the one and the other changes over time. Future research should further examine the keywords in context, and determine word concordances and valences to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the interplay between art and commerce in critics' discourse.

Our research was not intended to be the last word on the content of popular music criticism, and we are well aware of its limitations. By examining the entirety of the corpus at Rock's Backpages we believe our findings reflect not only what critics considered important but also what was important to musicians and others, and thus another research project could separate critics' writing from that of the subjects they quote, and examine each separately. Similarly, another study might look at the occupational roles of subjects who are quoted and who appear in the texts. Furthermore, we are well aware that our choice of keywords had consequences for our findings, and we believe that future research could expand the keywords used, and include ones associated with aesthetic dimensions of popular music criticism, as well. Finally, while the Rock's Backpages database is an excellent, large resource for the study of popular music criticism, it is unquestionably not a compendium of all criticism. It is a distillation of popular music criticism in periodicals that historically cater particularly to music fans, and that attract critics, and in many cases are seen as the pinnacle of a career for a popular music critic. The database is almost entirely limited to English-language criticism published in the U.K. and U.S. Daily newspapers largely are not represented. Future research that examines the similarities and differences in popular music criticism between daily newspapers and the periodicals found in Rock's Backpages would be particularly interesting to undertake, as would examination of criticism in non-English speaking contexts. It would similarly be interesting to examine differences between U.S. and U.K. critics' coverage of the topics we examined via our keywords. There are

significant differences in career options and trajectories, as well as publication types, audiences, distribution, etc., between the two countries, that merit additional consideration.

We hope therefore that our research is both illuminating and an inspiration to those who seek means to examine the long history of popular music criticism. Our basic content analysis will, we hope, serve as a springboard for others interested in using the Rock's Backpages database for similar research, as well as inspiration to those who might employ other methods, such as critical discourse analysis or deeper statistical analysis, to examine its large, and growing, corpus of popular music criticism.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Note the emphasis on/inclusion of "rock" in each camp, not "pop." While Christgau has maintained catholic musical tastes over the years, the rock-centric nature of his class of pop critics is reflected in the subtitle of an anthology from his heyday: *Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Other Pop Music, 1967–1973* (2000).

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