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The rough guide to critics: musicians discuss the role of the music press

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Abstract:

The UK music press serves as a source of entertainment and information for its readers, but it can also have an impact on the livelihoods of the musicians it relies on for content. Independent musicians have mixed feelings regarding the press; they need coverage to sustain their profession, but have become cynical about a system which appears to serve itself at the expense of the music it professes to champion. Through the compilation of a series of depth interviews with professional independent musicians from a cross-section of the genres of indie and jazz, this article organizes an account of how the press works from the artist's perspective and discusses some of the concrete effects of the music press on musicians, the industry, and consumers.

The music press serves an important function in popular music culture. Critics, as Roy Shuker writes, ‘perform an influential role as gatekeepers of taste and arbiters of cultural history, and are an important adjunct to the record companies’ marketing of their products’ (quoted in Lindberg *et al* 4). But while we are well accustomed to the idea of critics dissecting and discussing the products and personalities of professional musicians, what do musicians themselves think about critics and the music press industry as a whole? In compiling quotes from a series of interviews with professional musicians from the indie and jazz sectors, I found musicians’ attitudes towards popular music criticism to be as various as they are contradictory. But as I unpacked the tangle of opinions and perspectives, some surprising insights began to emerge, especially concerning about the concrete effects of the press on the music world. The press exerts an unexpected influence in certain areas, like the retail sector in the music industry, while having no effect on others, such as the several musicians who have sworn off in disgust from reading music reviews. Not surprisingly, a significant number of musicians believe that music criticism has very little to do with criticizing music.

Musicians discuss critics: a necessary evil

Media coverage is a crucial tool for musicians to make their product known to a wider audience. I talked to Tania Breen, a vocalist working in Fredericton (a small city in Canada with a population of 47,000), who lamented the absence of a proper arts listings weekly in her area.

Weeklies like *The Coast* in Halifax and *Here* in Saint John, those are great. But there’s nothing like that here [in Fredericton]. They promote music and musicians. If there’s no promotion, people don’t hear about it, and think it’s happening somewhere else, in some other city. So I think criticism is very important—if

people believe that there's a scene, then they'll support it. And one way of doing that is creating a scene with that kind of publication, with criticism and hype. (Tania Breen 2003)

Exposure to a mass audience, then, is clearly a positive function of the music press. Music news journalism can promote an artist's upcoming releases and performances, while feature articles and interviews can be vehicles for artists to justify and articulate their musical intentions. Richard Terfry, who records and performs under the moniker Buck 65, explains that 'I like to talk to the press, because I think it helps me plead my own case, to say things in my own words.' But the press, of course, is not simply free advertising, nor is it a mouthpiece for musicians, and their relationships with critics are often on tenterhooks. As Terfry puts it, 'the music press is my best friend and my worst enemy.' Most musicians have had their share of positive and negative experiences with the press, but the latter are almost always the more memorable. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that when asked to share their thoughts, musicians' complaints about the press far outweigh their compliments.

My exploration of the relationship between musicians and the press begins with a typical musician's horror story.

I've noticed that if you give someone—anyone, because this is just human nature—a record to listen to today they might hate it. Give it to them again in a week, they might love it. And that's the same for critics. Within the last year, I've seen the same record of mine get reviewed in *Q* magazine twice, and the first review was really bad and the second review was really good. I don't know if they forgot that they reviewed it the first time, but what does that mean? *What does that mean?* Before I signed a deal in Europe, one of my first moves to make some sort of impact in Europe was to get a publicist, and I specifically wanted to get my record reviewed in *Q*, and then they wrote a bad review of it, and that was a bit of a kick in the ass. My publicist called them, just to follow up, and the guy he spoke to said, 'you know what, as it turns out, we received the record on the day of our deadline and didn't get a chance to listen to it.' But they ran a review anyway. And

then months down the road they reviewed my record again, and I don't know if they had more time to listen to it, but they really liked it, and then lo and behold gave it a really glowing review. So in the end it doesn't really mean anything to me. (Richard Terfry 2003)

Embedded in Terfry's story are the two most frequent complaints from musicians about the press: that it is a) self-important; and b) uninformed. I will tackle these issues one at a time. There are a variety of stakeholders in the press; musicians are interested in getting their product to consumers, and consumers are interested in reading about musicians. But the press serves another interest before either of these: its own. Self-preservation as a business comes first, and often at the expense of competing interests from musicians and consumers. For the critic who reviewed Terfry's album, the importance of a deadline outweighed giving the record a listen and therefore a proper review—a decision that shortchanged both consumers and the artist. Musicians, of course, find this completely unacceptable.

I think that there's an attitude amongst music journalists that they are more important than the people making the music. And they're *not*. Even if the person who's making the music is rubbish, even if they're making rubbish music that nobody would like, it's still better than to be *writing* about the person making the rubbish music. (Gordon McIntyre, guitarist/vocalist for Ballboy, 2003)

Another means through which the music press flexes its self-importance, according to musicians like John MacLean of the Beta Band, is that 'too many critics get caught up in trying to find something new or cool,' thus elevating the importance of trendiness as a criteria for coverage.

Music does not 'need' the press but the press needs music. The press seem to forget that point and hijack the whole affair, telling us what we should and shouldn't like. (Barry Burns, multi-instrumentalist for Mogwai, 2003)

At the outset of this section, Tania Breen talked about the role of the press in

consolidating an arts scene. But when the press becomes self-important, musicians complain that it abuses this role by avoiding music that lies outside its editorial perception of what is 'cool' to its target readership, thus imposing limits on a musical scene rather than championing its growth. In the UK, where the press is particularly notorious for hype-based tabloid journalism, the *New Musical Express* (referred to hereafter as the *NME*) is the most obvious example of a music publication that openly promotes a 'what's cool' agenda.¹ Several musicians cited broadsheets and 'quality newspapers' as a counterexample, where editors were less concerned with being seen on the cutting edge of music trends. But broadsheets are also guilty of pandering to a few artists at the exclusion of others; the difference is that whereas the *NME* would never undermine its own authority, quality dailies are more likely to occasionally publish self-reflective articles about the critical process. Sean O'Hagan, for example, recently wrote in the *Observer* that

what strikes me about pop criticism of late—and this afflicts the broadsheets as well—is the tyranny of received opinion. I have yet to meet anyone, obsessive fan or otherwise, who thinks the last two Nick Cave albums come close to 1997's *The Boatman's Call* in terms of emotional depth and songwriting skill, but both releases were greeted with an across-the-board acclaim that bordered on instilled reverence, and an attendant lack of critical rigour. Likewise Beck's last few album releases since the ground-breaking *Odelay*. I mean, do you really reach for *Sea Change* or *Midnite Vultures* when you need a fix of Beck? (2003)

Several musicians emphasized the distinction between tabloid-style journalism that judged what was cool versus criticism that tried to justify what was good.

At any given time, Johnny Cash may be cool or uncool, but is that going to suggest that sometimes he sucks, sometimes he doesn't? But that's the impression you would get, because the press worries too much about coolness instead of what's *good*, and I don't think that should be their role. In fact, I don't know who's role it should be to say 'alright, I'm going to be the one who's gonna say what's cool.' And to me, that's my #1, bottom-line complaint with the press, is that they

have assumed the role for themselves as the pundits of cool. They have that power. (Richard Terfry 2003)

Musicians are generally suspicious that the press uses music coverage as just another tool to secure readerships rather than as an unfettered forum for debate about what music is worth hearing and why. Music criticism has given way to a redundant kind of consensus criticism where, as Stewart Henderson of the *Delgados* puts it, publications are 'playing to an audience that they know they can keep and work.' Frith and Forde have claimed that the current climate of the music press can be explained in terms of branding. Frith writes that when he worked as a critic for the *Sunday Times*,

I soon realized that a good press office was one that did not waste my time, that understood my tastes and readership and pitched me records and concert tickets accordingly ... Such matching of taste and publication soon resonated with the ways in which magazines and arts editors were themselves seeking an edge in an increasingly competitive market. Branding in this context meant associating a publication with a genre. (Frith 2002, p. 242)

Nick Cave, then, will always be well received in the *Guardian*, just as the White Stripes will be championed by the *NME*—that is until, of course, circulation figures for either publication start to fall and the editors scramble to re-brand the publication with more fashionable (read 'lucrative') house tastes.

Next to self-importance, the second most common complaint among musicians was that they found the music press to be often *uninformed*. This was certainly the case in Terfry's *Q* magazine story at the beginning of this chapter; it is amazing to think that a piece of music criticism can get away with having nothing to do with the music itself, just as it would be naive to think that Terfry's experience is unique. In a context where reviews are short and superficial, writer-focused and image-obsessed, a review which does not actually discuss the album may easily slip unnoticed past unwitting (or worse, culprit) editors, readers, and even the musician being reviewed, and this trend has caused many musicians to be suspicious of critics' credibility.

There's one guy in the *Evening Standard* who just kept harping on about how I looked like Phil Mitchell out of *EastEnders* [a popular British soap opera], which was nice, very musically astute of him [laughs]. Sometimes that stuff takes up 60% of the review, maybe because the guy doesn't know what he's talking about. (Brian Kellock, jazz pianist, 2003)

Most musicians have a sense that the fault lies not in individual journalists but rather in a flawed system, where deadlines and word limits inhibit the possibility for considered reviews.

The way the system is set up, there's not really enough time for them to digest the record in any way. They get 10-20 records a week, and they're just spinning through them. When I buy a record, it takes me two weeks just to figure out what's going on, and then I'm constantly learning after that. It's repeated listenings and uninterrupted listenings. If you're sitting in a newspaper office, and you're flipping through the tracks, you're not getting a feel of what's going on there. There are so many records that I've heard the first time and not liked, and then come back to them, they start to catch you on the fourth time, and end up becoming your favourite record. (Nathan Wiley, singer-songwriter, 2003)

The cause of hasty music criticism is due to a combination of factors. Considering that freelance journalists are almost always poorly paid and under heavy deadlines, it is remarkable that some are still able to offer considered criticism despite these constraints. But there are others, like the one in Terfry's story, who hand in reviews without having listened to the music. Stewart Henderson, who writes many of the press releases for his label Chemikal Underground, finds that an alarming amount of critics plagiarize whatever rhetoric the label sends them.

I like to read reviews that are clearly done by someone who has put some thought into it. And believe you me, as a person who's actually done some writing myself, there is nothing worse than reading a review which you know for a fact is just regurgitating the facts in the press release. It's just lazy, and it's not so much ill-

informed, because it *is* informed by the press release, but it's not informed by any thought that the critic's put into it. That's a real bone of contention for me, and you see that a worryingly high amount sometimes. (Stewart Henderson 2003)

But even if all critics had an unlimited time budget and were able to carefully consider their judgments on a particular album or artist, I get the sense from my interviews that half of the musicians would still feel uneasy about the subjectivity inherent in music criticism. Two distinct views emerged: the first was best articulated by Tom Bancroft, a jazz drummer who also runs a successful independent record label called Caber Music.

[An uninformed critic] equates music she doesn't like with music that's bad. For me, that's a bad critic, or at least a bad editor. She shouldn't be reviewing stuff that she's definitely not going to like. Whereas ... a good critic like John Fordham [jazz reviewer for the *Guardian*]... doesn't impose his own taste on it. I think he assesses the music by its own criteria. So if you're making a Dixieland album, he'll review it and assess it. He's got enough knowledge to do that. He could give Stacey Kent a good review, even though I'm sure he doesn't like Stacey Kent. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

For Tom and those musicians like him, critics should to be allowed and even encouraged to discriminate between good and bad music, so long as their musical knowledge base is appropriate to the music they're reviewing. In other words, a critical review is fine so long as it is well informed. The second group, however, feels strongly that a reviewer should behave like any other journalist and dedicate themselves to presenting the facts, but leave bias and criticism out of the article as much as possible.

I just find there's too much of somebody's personal taste in there. If I was a reviewer and I got something I didn't like, I think they should pass on it rather than give someone a bad review. Just because they don't get what that artist is trying to do doesn't mean that it's not a good product. (Nathan Wiley 2003)

For Wiley, it doesn't matter whether a critic's taste is well-reasoned or informed by musical knowledge; it is always somewhat unfair to publicly pass judgment on a record, because a critic may turn potential listeners off from an album they would have otherwise enjoyed. The importance of this distinction cannot be underestimated; it underlines what appears to be a fundamental difference between the mindsets of critics versus those of certain musicians. Another example helps to make this distinction clear:

Just 'cause I don't like it, that don't mean that I have a call on what's good and bad music.

MB: But following that, does that mean there's no such thing as bad music?

Absolutely! I don't think there's no bad music out there. I think that every note played is good to somebody. Even if it's played in the wrong key [laughs].

(George Porter Jr., bassist for the Meters, 2001)

But does this mean that musicians are not critical themselves? Of course not. Porter admits at the outset that he has his own tastes, and indeed, musicians can often be very critical of their peers' technical ability on their instruments. But there is a rift between the critical approaches of musicians and critics which stems in no small part from the fact that they are often speaking different languages.

I have a publicist, and she writes the press releases in language that excites press people. The language I would use would bore them to hell.

MB: What language is that?

The truth! Musical truth, more down the line of explaining what it's all about if I have a new record. I used to write them myself, and I had people say to me, 'maybe you should get someone else to write them for you. They're too anal.'

(Tommy Smith, jazz saxophonist and composer, 2003)

Smith makes an important distinction between two approaches to writing about music: the technical musical analysis versus metaphoric, emotionally exciting language. When he describes the former as more 'truthful,' it is because his musical discourse is agreed upon by a community of jazz saxophonists, and therefore such judgments are objective

within that community. A pentatonic scale will always be described as such in jazz, and Smith can criticize a student for not having learned one properly. The problem with music criticism, then, is that it relies on the second kind of language—the colourful, metaphorical kind. A pentatonic scale can be described as exhilarating, mystical or boring. Without a clear set of aesthetic principles shared by both musician and critic the two groups are effectively alienated from one another, leaving some artists surprised and rankled by what earns critical acclaim.

If you're a person who, to think of the crudest example, farts on record, you're probably going to find a following out there. And that's something that you can really struggle with as an artist, is if you've seen something that you think is total garbage do really well in the press and sell lots of copies. What does that mean? That kind of just pulls the carpet right out from under you, it makes the framework really irrelevant. (Richard Terfry 2002)

To further complicate the matter, Smith admitted later in our interview that he much preferred reading colourful, poetic criticism to technical analysis, even though he was not very good at writing in that style himself. It is the entertaining, inflammatory style of criticism that readers have come to expect from writers, but critics' tendencies towards subjective readings are often perceived by musicians as downright ignorant and irresponsible.

Critics could certainly make the argument that 'it's just my opinion, take it or leave it.' The frustration if you're in a band is like, yeah it would be very nice if it was just as straightforward as that, but you know for a large amount of people, it isn't just your opinion, it's the entire circulation of your magazine's opinion once they read it, unless they are strong willed enough, or they're already a fan of that band and will disregard the bad review and buy it anyway, or go and seek out a good review and formulate a balanced opinion on that record. If we don't sell enough records, then we get dropped by our publishing company, which is our only wage, and we have mortgages to pay, and the bands splits up. It's as simple as that, it's not a melodramatic statement. Now obviously the argument is, good songwriters

will rise to the top, and if you make good records you'll do alright. But I could paper the walls of my house with albums that were fantastic that never sold any. (Stewart Henderson 2003)

Musicians are comfortable with the fact that there's no accounting for taste. They are also highly critical of music themselves; what makes the music press different is that music criticism is justifying what's good and bad *to a mass audience*. In the same way that politicians come under fire for making policies that run counter to the public's moral values, so too are bad critics disparaged by citizens of the musical community—worse, perhaps, since critics are unelected. Critics' judgments are no longer a matter of taste; when they affect others, they become a matter of morality. A feeling emerges among some musicians that with the privilege of writing for a large audience comes an ethical responsibility and perhaps even a kind of diplomacy. Critics, of course, would not share this view; furthermore, such diplomatic writing would undoubtedly make for dull music journalism.

Some musicians become so fed up with the press that they quit reading it, taking what I call the 'Elvis Costello line,' named after the musician who once famously said that 'writing about music is like dancing about architecture. It's a really stupid thing to want to do.'

I get so many e-mails asking what a particular song meant, and I can't answer. I'm not 100% sure what it means, the reason I wrote it was I was trying to explain something that I couldn't just say or speak out loud. And then the critic narrows it down—the thing that possibly infuriates me the most is someone saying 'what he's trying to do is,' or 'what he's saying is,'—so the song you made ends up getting compressed into this tiny little nugget of coal. (Gordon McIntyre 2003)

When asked what he would do on behalf of musicians to improve the music press, John MacLean declared 'I would get rid of 'em all. Rely on first hand experience and word of mouth.' The majority of musicians, however, hold more moderate views. When asked whether there ought to be 'critic police' to ensure that all reviews were

impartial, Stewart Henderson felt that '[it couldn't] be anything other than a step backwards.' Music criticism done well can be a forum for valuable feedback to musicians. Even MacLean admits that 'sometimes critics may highlight a problem that we don't realize because we're too close to the material.' Andy Stochansky felt that being under public critical scrutiny was a useful measure especially for his live performances, saying that critics 'keep you on your toes.' For musicians like Tom Bancroft, a subjective but informed review can also help musicians to see how their work fits into a wider musical context.

We got a bad review for one of our releases last month, and I think it was fair. I think it was good for the artist as well. The review stated that the album wasn't very original, it's a Coltrane sort of rip-off, but this guy's got promise. Good critics can provide important feedback to the artists on what they're doing, so for the development of the music it's important to have people out there. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

So do critics have the the power, then, to influence the music musicians make? Like any criticism, it appears that a review only holds weight if the musician has great respect for the writer. This is not to say that musicians will ever make music specifically to please critics—says Gordon McIntyre, 'you should cut your hands off before you even consider it,'—but all musicians look for acceptance, especially in the early stages of their careers, be it from fellow musicians, audiences, or even the press.

I really don't care. I mean, after you've been criticized for 25 years, you really don't give a shit anymore.

MB: What about the beginning of those years?

When you're young? Of course, you need, you want good reviews. Everybody does. (Tommy Smith 2003)

Beyond ego-stroking, however, good press may also be a necessary stepping stone in establishing an artist's viability, which I will explore by turning to another group of stakeholders in the music world: the industry.

Good press can make a really big difference, because it's one of the only ways to make people sit up and pay attention to what you're doing, without having anyone really behind you. To put a record out there with no money to promote it and make videos and get it on the radio, to get good reviews from a major paper or something, will bring your record to the attention of people. (Nathan Wiley 2003)

MB: So the press is a necessary evil?

I don't think it's an evil. I think it's great. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

The significance of critics for the music industry

It may be possible to have a successful career in popular music without being signed to a major label, but it is certainly not easy. The significant cash flow of a big record company can pay for pluggers to plead with DJs for airplay and journalists for column inches. It can also pay for advertising campaigns and retail packages from chain stores like HMV, which ensure that an artist's album will be racked on a prominent shelf in CD stores. But while critics may not need to love a major act like Westlife for the group to sell albums, the press can play a vital role for independent artists trying to break into the popular public consciousness. Take the case of the post-rock group Mogwai, who were signed to Chemikal Underground before moving on to a major label contract.

Mogwai were a band that were very, *very* heavily championed by *NME* right from the beginning. The other interesting thing about Mogwai, obviously, is that they were a band that was really not relevant as far as radio was concerned. So their success, I think, was very much down to the live performances and the championing that they received from the *NME* particularly; and then when their second album came out, the support from the press that had been consolidated at *NME* started to cross over to other magazines. (Stewart Henderson 2003)

Even for artists who have come not to rely on major labels for funding, such as many jazz musicians, good press is important for getting important funding from other sources. Cathie Rae runs Alba Arts, a small company that writes grant applications for jazz and folk musicians.

Some of the criteria for the grants are that you have to be an established, high-profile artist. This is why Tommy Smith gets so many grants. This is why Brian Kellock is starting to get grants. (Cathie Rae 2003)

As I posited earlier, critics whom musicians *respect* may have an influence on their music-making, but it is rare for a musician to attribute a critic with a better discriminating ear than herself or her musician peers. But even when critics hold no influence over an individual artist's music-making, it will become clear that they play no small part in determining what music ends up being commercially viable.

The problem for independent musicians is that running a successful press campaign is a complicated process, requiring expertise, connections and specialized knowledge of how the music press works. Even if a musician knows the rules of good music-making, her career may not take off if she remains ignorant of the rules of properly marketing her product. And how do musicians learn the rules of music marketing? The hard way, apparently:

When we started the label, we were musicians who knew nothing about the record business. So we released seven albums on the same day, and didn't send out review copies until about a month later. Which is clearly the wrong way, it's absolutely ridiculous. And the distributor should have said, don't release them all on the same day, stagger them a month apart, because we got some press for the label, but we didn't get any reviews for the releases. It was a disaster. And when we sent 30 or 40 copies of each out initially, we didn't follow it up. We just waited and nothing happened. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

Based on the information I obtained in my interviews, then, I have compiled a list of five rules that every independent musician ought to know about of the role of the press

in successfully marketing their music. I am mainly indebted to two people for the bulk of the information below: Tom Bancroft, owner and operator of the Edinburgh-based jazz label Caber Music, and Stewart Henderson, co-owner and operator of Scotland's leading independent rock label, Chemikal Underground.

Rule 1: Effective press needs to be tied into retail.

The majority of records in Britain are sold in supermarkets, such as Asda, Tesco and Safeway, and in department stores such Woolworth's.² But these stores rarely, if ever, stock indie and specialist genre albums. Instead, such genres must rely on a small number of major CD retail chains and independent record stores for sales. Tom Bancroft was able to relate to me specific information on industry trends in the jazz music sector for 2003. As few as five major chains currently make up the vast majority of jazz sales (HMV [34%], MVC [20%], Virgin [14%], Borders [4%], and Tower [3%, and who are now are nearly bust]). But the modes of operation in music retail have been changing in recent years; all of the major chains now stock CDs using 'central buyers,' meaning that five people are responsible for deciding what gets sold in 75% of the market. (In some cases, this change has occurred as recently as three years ago, when Caber Music were still able have their music stocked in the Edinburgh Virgin store, which had an individual buyer.) The remaining sales occur through independent music stores (15%), of which only 20 sell significant amounts of jazz, and Amazon (6%). This means that only 25 people in the UK decide whether a jazz album will be sold to a mass audience.

In addition to central buying, the five major chain stores have become increasingly powerful by introducing the practice of 'retail packs.' The fact is, as Stewart Henderson describes, 'that there are so many new releases out there now that the shops can ill afford to fill their shelves with slow moving stock.' To solve this problem, buyers only take in a limited number of new releases from a given genre every month.

At HMV there's 24 non-pop retail packs up for grabs every month. And that's for folk, world music, classical, *and* jazz. If you don't get one of them, you're not going to sell even 1000 records. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

This not only makes retail packs highly competitive (there are a larger number of available 'pop' retail packs, but the same principles apply), but can mean almost guaranteed sales failure for independent artists not offered a pack. An HMV retail pack, for example, includes stocking at least 5 copies of the album in every store in the UK, getting racked on a 'new release' or equivalent high profile shelf, and a small write-up or ad in the *HMV Choice* in-store flyer. In exchange for these privileges (one of which, remember, includes the album being stocked *at all*), labels are expected to pay the chain a retail pack fee.

The other crucial catch is that an artist cannot request a retail pack: they must be offered one by the central buyer. Before an album is released, Stewart Henderson explains that buyers 'will demand to see a 'plot' for each release in order to justify freeing up the shelf space/offering retail packs.' According to him, this plot consists of:

- 1) High profile in the press (good reviews across the board/ideally features in key publications)
- 2) Radio Airplay (the more the better)
- 3) Band Activity (tours/promo/radio sessions/interviews)
- 4) Band Retail History (this will be taken into account to a lesser extent)

For new and non-radio friendly independent artists, criteria 2 and 4 are irrelevant, meaning that good press and a high band profile at the time of release are essential for an album to even have a chance of reaching a mass market. A Scottish band, for instance, will have to arrange to launch a new CD release with a concert tour that places them in London roughly three weeks before their album hits store shelves in order to get crucial coverage from national music publications.

Retail chains have become increasingly powerful in that they are much more choosy about what hits their high profile shelves. [With the necessity of presenting a press plot], pressure is placed on the label to time all promotion so it coalesces into a convincing whole at the time of hitting retail. (Stewart Henderson 2003)

[Buyers are] looking for a picture of critical press coverage that's going to drive

sales, and if they don't see that predicted, then they won't stock the album. You have to get the reviews at the right time as well, which is why it's frustrating, 'cause you could get a really good review a month late, and it's not going to change sales by much at all, because it's not going to be in the shops. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

Somewhat suspiciously, then, an accepted part of album marketing includes currying favour with journalists to provide guaranteed positive reviews *before* an album's release.

Rule 2: Genre labels are an essential part of the marketing process.

Musicians generally despise being pigeon-holed into genres.

MB: Define folk music.

I can't, and I hate the term. Actually, I don't hate it, but I'm frustrated with it, because it depends on the culture you come from, to define what it is. Labels and classifications pretty often just come from the industry side where they literally have to find a box in the store to put you in. (Stephen Fearing, singer-songwriter, 2001)

The main problem I face these days is that, in the simplest sense, most people see me fitting into the hip-hop category. So there I am, lumped in with all other hip-hop stuff. But I can tell you, your average person who isn't a fan of hip-hop thinks of one thing when they hear the word. Even when someone writes 'this is a great hip-hop record, it's none of that usual crap you've come to expect,' but sometimes that's about all they say. And so for someone who's a Johnny Cash fan, it means he reads that review and it's probably not saying much to him. 'Well, it's still a hip-hop record, and I'm just not interested.' Sometimes just that word being there, especially if it's not followed up, is just enough. In my mind, these days it's just a dirty word, a bad word. (Richard Terfry 2003)

The press, of course, is notorious for its compulsion to categorize music in just

such a way. Many critics aspire in their careers to coin a label that will capture an era, like 'punk', and in the meantime a million forgettable but not entirely useless labels, such as 'alt.country' and 'no-frills college', are invented to describe what an artist sounds like. As it turns out, however, such press categorizations may be essential to successfully marketing a product. Simon Frith explains in his book *Performing Rites* that Genre distinctions are central to how record company A&R departments work. The first thing asked about any demo tape or potential signing is what *sort* of music is it, and the importance of this question is that it integrates an inquiry about the music (what does it sound like) with an inquiry about the market (who will buy it). The underlying record company problem, in other words, how to turn music into a commodity, is solved in generic terms ... decisions about recording sessions, promotional photos, record jackets, press interviews, video styles, and so on, will all be taken with genre rules in mind (Frith 1996, pp. 75-76)

This is certainly the convention, but some musicians have surmised that a less constrictive alternative to the genre-branding process may exist.

When you start dealing with the major press, people at record companies, and booking agents, and video channels, and all these other things, people, places that need categories. Things have to be a certain way in order for it to make sense for them. So I face that. There is this never-ending need that critics and editors at magazines have to fit things into a category. Unless you get the rare case, someone like Beck, someone like Bjork, who have managed due to perseverance to just transcend it all, well she's just Bjork, he's just Beck, and you just have to say their names and you've got it. You don't need to compare them to anyone else, and if anything, they've become one of the names that other people get compared to sometimes. (Richard Terfry 2003)

Where do the Becks and the Bjorks of the world fit in? These exceptions are worth a case study on their own, but the important point in the context of the press is that they are *exceptions* to the rule; the next principle of press coverage will demonstrate the

importance of genre, and of clearly establishing a certain kind of music for a certain kind of audience.

Rule 3: There is a hierarchy of desirable press coverage according to musical genre.

Once an artist has a clear idea of their genre, they can plan specific press coverage that exposes them to what the industry perceives to be their target market; this becomes especially important when presenting a press plot to central buyers. In the indie rock genre, magazines are at the top and broadsheets are roughly at the bottom of the list.

From our point of view [as an independent rock label], if you were to look at the magazines around at the moment that are important, you would say *Q*, *Uncut*, *Mojo*, *NME*, and in the rock area things like *Kerrang!* and *Rock Sound*. And then beyond that you have the style magazines like *Face* and *ID* and all these things, and then below that again, not necessarily below that, but you've got all the broadsheets and tabloids. So, I mean, all those magazines I mentioned are only half a dozen, so if you don't get written about in one or two of those magazines, that's a disaster, it's a disaster! (Stewart Henderson 2003)

This hierarchy is reversed in the jazz sector: quality dailies become the most desirable form of coverage while jazz magazines are relegated to the bottom.

This is what they want: *Independent*, *Times*, *Observer*, *Guardian*. All within the space of three weeks. The most important thing is *Guardian* CD of the week. If you say to them, 'we're going to get CD of the week in the *Guardian*,' then you'll get a retail pack offer. But you want to have all of those main quality dailies and Sunday papers, and that should be enough to get you in. Anything else, radio play, specialist magazines, is a bonus. Broadsheets are where it's at for jazz. You could get a fantastic review in *Jazz Review*, *Jazz Wise*, *Jazz UK* [specialist jazz magazines], doesn't really make a huge amount of difference to the distributors. The readership's very low—it's for fans and nerds, and they can buy in lots of different ways [through the website, special order], whereas getting five copies into every HMV in the country, getting it racked, getting space in *HMV Choice*, that's when

you start to sell some volume, and for that they want to see broadsheet reviews tied in with the release date. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

It is important to remember that both Bancroft and Henderson are operating independent labels with mostly new or low-profile artists. Tommy Smith provides a counterexample of an established musician who made his name in a time before retail packs and press plots.

My best selling records have had the worst reviews. My worst selling albums have had the best reviews.

MB: Tom Bancroft said that his distributors have found that to get offered a retail pack in stores, getting Guardian 'CD of the week' really helps. In your experience, is that true?
I wouldn't know. We get CD of the week every year for every record we release. It's not anything new, it's predictable. You get it if you make a good record. Same with the *Observer*. It's just hard to gauge. Depends on how much research you do. I've been around a lot longer than some of the artists on Tom's label, so it's easier for me. I don't need to sell myself.

MB: Your name is a sign of quality?

I suppose - but if you put out a bad record then you're gonna lose it. If I put out a pop record, that's the end of the road! (Tommy Smith 2003)

Smith and established artists like him operate differently, as do artists who have major-label funding; they will be guaranteed to be stocked regardless of critical success because they either have a history of retail success or can afford to run a massive advertising campaign. But for most artists who have not been afforded such a lucky break, good reviews from the right publications are crucial.

Rule 4: The industry is the most important reader of the press.

The unpredictability of the popular music market is evidence enough that consumers seldom treat the music press as gospel truth. A guaranteed loyal readership, however, will be the record executives and retailers who have a huge commercial incentive to keep up with the latest musical happenings and trends. Critics' year-end

round up lists are a perfect example of how critics hold more influence over the industry than the punter:

The BBC Jazz awards and critics' year-end lists don't boost sales hardly at all, because they're not tied into retail [see rule #1]. You look at the Brit awards for pop and rock, then you'll have racking in all stores of all the nominees and lots of features in *HMV Choice*. HMV sponsor the Brit awards, so they're completely locked in with retail. Whereas the BBC Jazz Awards has only been going for two years, and it has no relationship with retail whatsoever, so sales don't respond to it. What is significant about those awards and lists is that they tend to reflect the status of the label in the industry, and the status of an artist as well. So the fact that we've [Caber Music] had an album of the year in the *Guardian* list for the last two years—and we're the only British label to do that—is fantastic for us, because people think we're really high quality and we're really good. And so people can't ignore us, they can't say 'well, who are they?' Those things keep us in the industry's mind. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

In other words, ending up on a few 'best of year' lists may not generate a response in consumers *per se*, but could catalyze a chain reaction of media buzz that fuels the 'what's cool' agenda and catches the attention of the industry.

MB: You've been getting reviewed by London publications like the Observer and the New Statesman.

Well, I've only just started getting reviews basically since the album got the [BBC Jazz] award and things. (Brian Kellock 2003)

That's the thing about press, it has two audiences, the industry audience and the punter. And the impact on punters is less significant. It will only have an impact on punter if they walk into a record shop and they see the CD, 'oh, I read about that one!', whereas the industry is really the more important reader in the long term.

We had this feature on us by Miles Kington in the *Independent*. It's very difficult to get a jazz coverage in the UK dailies, and it's very competitive, and

columnists like Miles, who are just writing general feature articles, almost never mention jazz. So he wrote this completely unprompted piece, we had no PR going on or anything. It was a fantastic, positive piece about the label, and the buyer called me and said, 'do you know what happened today? Have you seen the *Independent*?' I had the buyer from fucking HMV phoning *me*—which has never happened before, the buyer never phones the distributor, you're always chasing *them*—going 'have you seen the *Independent*, there's this incredible piece,' so that kind of thing is worth a lot. It means that the buyers are going 'these guys are getting noticed.' It keeps you in the frame. (Tom Bancroft 2003)

Another example comes from Henderson, whose band the Delgados were nominated for a Mercury Music Prize with their album *The Great Eastern*. The Mercury Prize is similar to the Brit Awards in that it is strongly linked to retail, and thus a nomination can seriously affect album sales.³ Unfortunately, the Delgados were not able to reap the full rewards of this nomination due to another hard lesson learned about the role of the press in the industry.

Rule 5: Huge amounts of capital are needed to fully take advantage of good press.

If a ubiquitous, high-profile artist like U2 is nominated for a Mercury prize, then their already giant sales will hardly be affected. But for many low profile artists, a Mercury nomination can yield instant public attention, sometimes resulting in a dramatic boost in albums sold. But the payoff can be deceptively low if such an artist lacks major label funding.

Chemikal Underground is not a cash organization, so cash flow is quite tricky for us. We were really reaching the outer limits of what we could afford to spend on *The Great Eastern*, and then when the Mercury nomination came along, we were initially flushed with an unbelievable excitement about what it would mean for us, and all the albums we would sell, and the money that that would bring in.

Unfortunately, retail chains like HMV told us that we would have to pay for a package to get our CDs up on the special Mercury nominations racks in stores. And additionally they told us 'we're gonna take an obligatory 25% cut on every

copy of the album, and a retrospective 25% on all of your CDs in our warehouse that we took previously.' They've got you by the throat! You have a window of opportunity when you get nominated to exploit the album as much as you can, and if we'd had more money, we would have perhaps been able to re-advertise the album in magazines, take journalists to our gigs to do features, but we just never had the money to do that. And as a result, of all the albums that were nominated that year, *The Great Eastern* ended up being one of the least visible ones of the shortlist, and I think that's obvious when you see the sale-through we had on it. (Stewart Henderson 2003)

Unlimited funding from a multinational record company cannot guarantee the commercial success of an artist, but it certainly helps. Critical acclaim can potentially serve as a platform for low profile and independent musicians to boost their audience, but even if they are savvy enough to be able to run a successful press campaign, money and resources would be stretched further than most self-funded artists can handle to properly exploit their good press with tours, advertising and TV appearances. The kind of capital needed to take their profile up that extra notch and keep the chain reaction going is rarely available without the support of a major label and its press officers.

Conclusion

Independent musicians are extremely cynical about the music press process, and yet they *need* that process to work for them in order to maintain and expand their audience. It is the grinding of these two opposing feelings that creates the steam which musicians have vented to me over the course of these interviews. Whether it ought to or not, the press does matter, and the ways in which it matters are not as intangible as academics have suggested in the past. But the press matters differently to the distinct social groups involved in music-making and listening practices, and to neglect these complexities leads to over-generalizations about the function of the music press which prove to be of little use when applied to a specific case. Previous academic research has tended to focus on the ideology and discourse issues at stake in the music press;

musicians themselves, however, have a refreshingly pragmatic understanding of the the press as a both a social group with whom they must interact and an important intermediary industry with which they must deal in order to get records onto store shelves and radio playlists. The practicality of this understanding may also serve as a useful reminder for researchers: analysis of the discourse of the music press need not necessarily come at the expense of an investigation into its concrete effects, and indeed, an incorporation of both of these aspects into future research may yield a more accurate picture of the role of the press in popular music culture.

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¹ For more on the differences between the British and American music press, see Lindberg *et al* (2000).

² For precise retail market statistics, see the British Phonographic Industry website, www.bpi.co.uk.

³ For more on the commercial consequences of Mercury Prize nominations, see 'Mercury list boosts award outsiders' (2003).