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### **Title of PhD**

The Story of Selling Out: The development of the tension between art and commerce in the popular music press

### **The focus of my research**

The title of my PhD project hopefully raises a few questions: what do I mean by the tension between art and commerce in popular music, why is this an interesting research topic, and why is the music press an appropriate focus to study this tension?

Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no such thing as musical mass culture. But the marketing of sheet music and family home pianos to middle-class consumers marked the beginning of a new kind of industry: rather than having a single patron to fund their work, it became increasingly the norm for professional musicians to be funded by a mass audience that bought mass-produced cultural commodities. The invention of recording technology cemented at the turn of the century cemented this change.

Jazz was one of the first musical styles to sell a substantial amount of records, and it challenged the conventional distinctions between high “art” culture and low “pop” culture. As Gary Giddins suggests,

jazz evolved as part of an equilateral triangle along with the traditions of the academy (“classical” music) and the marketplace (“pop” music) . . . Before jazz, there was no triangle—only a line, a rope if you will, tugged on one side by the forces of high art and on the other by forces of low (34-35).

The birth of a musical culture industry gave rise to a new dilemma for artists: they faced the conflict of trying to appeal to a mass audience versus making music that they thought was worthwhile. Would they be able to maintain their artistic integrity, or would they sell out?

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the music industry has grown from a collection of largely independent entrepreneurs to a global, multi-billion dollar industry. As it has grown, a complex discourse has developed to handle the perceived tension between art

and commerce. In the 1930s, for instance, critics, fans, and musicians argued about whether jazz was able to retain its artistic autonomy in the face of its mass exploitation by the culture industry. But you can pick up a copy of a music magazine 70 years later and find a contemporary manifestation of this discourse which is just as heated now as it was then.

What interests me is the history of the tension between art and commerce and the discourse that has emerged from it, and I intend to trace this history through the pages of the music press. Popular music discourse is transmitted through many mediums, but for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most important vehicles for discourse have been pop periodicals like *Metronome*, *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone* in America and *Melody Maker* and *NME* in the UK.<sup>1</sup> It is within their pages that extended discussion about pop music takes place; the music press is the forum for arguments about the value of music and the medium through which the ideology of a musical culture is generated and disseminated to a mass audience. As I explore the development of the tension between art and commerce in the music press, I want to ask questions like:

- 1) What are the roots of the art/commerce tension in popular music discourse?
- 2) What makes it compelling, and why does it persist?
- 3) What are the significant developments or changes in the manifestation of this tension over history and with the creation of new genres?
- 4) What arguments get recycled or repeated over time and across genres?

**Theory:**

My supervisor has repeatedly advised me not to worry too much about theory, suggesting that just as music theory is devised to account for a piece of music after it has been made, so too will it be easier and more effective to create a theoretical framework after I have conducted some of my own research. The method of deriving theory from empirical work, also known as “grounded theory,” has a precedent and is a common practice for historical research. Even so, I think it’s important for me to have a foundational understanding of the theories used to analyze art discourses. Some of the best analysis of the varying approaches can be found in Simon Frith’s book *Performing*

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<sup>1</sup> My research is restricted to America and the UK, partly due to my language limitations, but also because those two areas have held the greatest economic importance and influence in the production and consumption of popular music.

*Rites*, which examines the aesthetic discourse of popular music. Frith also proposes a “a sociological approach to contemporary aesthetic discourse” which he derives by synthesizing two previous influential models:

Howard S. Becker’s account of “art worlds” and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital.” Becker suggests that to understand art objects and people’s response to them we have to understand the institutional and discursive processes (the art world) in which they are constructed as art objects, as works to which a particular sort of aesthetic response is socially appropriate. Bourdieu uses the concept of cultural capital to relate cultural values to social structural variables (social class variables in his case), to questions of power and hierarchy that Becker puts to one side. The reason different people engage with different art worlds has to do with the amount (and type) of cultural capital they possess. For Bourdieu, in other words, the aesthetic response can only be understood by reference to the social organization of taste which patterns people’s lifestyle, morality, and habitus (35-36).

I think the approach outlined above is well suited to my project. In terms of discourse theory, my aim is to examine the way in which people make sense of their world in linguistic terms, rather than in the Foucauldian or Lacanian sense people being “determined” by language. There is a precedent for this alternative approach to discourse analysis in the field of ethnomusicology, where scholars such as Martin Stokes have argued for the use of discourse-oriented ethnography as a way of exploring and explaining a culture in the words of its participants (this approach is contrasted by the work of structuralist musicologists, who suggest that the meaning of music can be derived from music “in itself”). In my project I intend to critically examine the way people write and talk about music within their art world, looking at the shared assumptions about value among members of that art world—if I look at jazz criticism in the 1930s, for instance, arguably the most prominent assumption is that if a record is not musically innovative, it is imitative, and therefore of lesser value. This shared assumption is part of a jazz discourse which critics share, allowing them to talk (and argue) with one another about the merits of particular examples of jazz.

### **My research in process – secondary sources**

The first year of my PhD has mostly been spent reading, as comprehensively as possible, the secondary literature that discusses the popular music press. There has been an absence of research on popular music criticism and the press until the last ten years or

so, and even since then there have been very few publications that focus primarily on the music press. My task has been to search for and read music books and articles (both academic work and books aimed at a popular audience) that either draw from music press clippings or make mention of its role in some way. I have made a few discoveries that continue to guide my research process:

1) Writing about the music press comes from a wide range of academic and non-academic disciplines. The best books are written by scholars from departments including Music, English, History, Film and Media, Sociology, and Philosophy. Several useful books have also been written by journalists or freelancers from outside the academy. As a result, it sometimes feels like my work lies on the margins of disparate academic traditions. This is sometimes quite liberating, but I am occasionally faced with a ream of footnotes of sources I've never read, leaving me with the feeling that my own work lacks roots, and I may be borrowing hodge-podge from academic disciplines which I know very little about. *Is this a problem common to all doctoral students, and does anyone have suggestions for synthesizing a credible research approach from a wide range of traditions?*

2) Recurring themes and patterns are beginning to emerge from my reading. Issues of race, authenticity, mass culture, innovation, star quality, and craft are all discussed in the secondary literature, and it will be my job to discover whether they are also apparent in the back issues of the press, or whether different themes emerge.

3) From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the end of the 1970s, the music press has been the most vital historical record of popular music discourse. But discourse has also come from conversations, radio chat, books, television, fanzines, mainstream print media, and I will need to examine these other sources in relation to the music press, since they all operate interdependently. Traditional music papers have diminished in importance especially in the last few decades, with the arrival of MTV and, more recently, music sites on the internet. This significant shift may well affect the scope of my own research, as I will explain later.

4) Finally, it has become obvious from my reading that jazz and rock music have by far generated the greatest amount of music criticism and press coverage, and that at least in the up until the 1970s, the tension between art and commerce is at its most

complex in the discourses of jazz and rock (as opposed to blues, folk, country, or rhythm and blues). I suspect, however, that some of the music cultures that have emerged in the last 3 decades (punk and hip-hop, for example) have comparably complex and distinct discourses. In any event, since I hope to focus on cases where the tension between art and commerce is at its most interesting, and for the moment I concentrating on tracing the origins of that tension by looking at the early jazz and rock press.

### **My research in process – primary sources**

In January 2004 I had my first opportunity to do archival research of primary sources. I made some great discoveries reading through old issues of *Down Beat* magazine, and realized that I hadn't allowed enough space in my original chapter outline to discuss its influence. I think that the direction and emphasis of my project will continue to shift, particularly as I do primary research, and I feel fine about this. It does, however, make it difficult to write a paper such as this, since as I write I am also involved in my second excursion to the archives, and I can feel the focus of my PhD shifting again already! Suffice it to say that my project is still very much in process, and may have changed considerably by the time I get to Helsinki. For now, here are a few problems, practical concerns, and questions arising:

### **Problems, concerns, questions:**

1) In a pure sociological study, how you choose your sample is extremely important. My work seems to fit more into a history department than it does sociology or communications, and therefore my method for sampling through old issues of magazines is slightly different. Secondary literature gives me clues as to where the interesting stories and angles lie concerning the tension between art and commerce in the press, and I follow those clues up by looking at *Rolling Stone* from 1967-1970, for example, and making discoveries. But I also need to justify why I'm *not* looking at other sources, and why the periods I am looking at are the most relevant. I feel a tension between the *historical* thrust of my project versus a social *scientific* approach to researching archived material. *Is it possible to resolve this?*

2) Where's the rule book to working with microfilm? How do I gather data efficiently? I think this probably a simple matter of getting more experience doing archival research, but does anyone have any useful tips?

3) After I've gathered my data, how do I avoid the pitfalls of discourse analysis? Certain discourse analysis has fallen out of favour because of its flawed assumption that an analysis of the discourse itself can reveal the dominant ideology of a magazine, without taking into account the intentions of writers and editors, etc. One guiding principle in my research will be to remain aware that even as the music press polices music scenes for signs of commercialization, the press is itself a commercial enterprise. Discursive shifts may occur in magazine simply because a publisher decides to appeal to a new readership. But no one has written a history of *Down Beat*, *Metronome*, *Melody Maker*, or *NME*, so how will I be able to understand the editorial or authorial intent behind the content in each issue? Sometimes I want to guess that a policy change has taken place because of a shift in the content in the magazine (when *Down Beat* decided to drop its country & western coverage in 1954, for example), because it's impossible to know for certain without conducting research into the institutional history of *Down Beat*. I hope to interview a few critics who were writing for the press during key periods to supplement my own analysis; the problem is that I hardly know where to start, since many of the writers and editors for these magazines may be dead or difficult to track down! *Has anyone done similar research into the institutional histories of periodicals? Any advice?*

4) How do I structure my research? Should my chapters be organized chronologically or thematically? The focus of my project is the tension between art and commerce, but what if I discover that it's the wrong focus, or worse, what if my desire to explore that tension blinds me to other issues that are more important? When I look through microfilm, the words "commerce," "corruption," and "selling out" always catch my attention, but am I missing other important issues? I obviously need to examine questions of authenticity, race, progress and other themes to contextualize my focus on art/commerce?

5) *Where does my project begin, and where does it end?* This is a huge question for me at the moment. My original idea was to divide my PhD into two halves: the first half would look at the roots of the ideology of independence—by which I mean the notion of artistic independence, free from the “corrupting” forces of commerce—in the early and jazz and rock press. The second half would examine the survival of that ideology by focusing on some of its contemporary manifestations. I was considering doing an ethnographic study of a particular band and their relation to the press, or an ethnography or interviews with people working in music journalism, or even a continued discourse analysis of newer genres in the press, such as punk, hip-hop, and “alternative.”<sup>2</sup>

I worry now that my original plan may have been too ambitious, especially given the richness of the archival material I have collected so far. What was originally intended to be the first half of my project might even expand into a full-length project of its own, perhaps with a title like “The Roots of Rock Criticism.” But none of this is certain; my supervisor is encouraging a very open-ended approach to my PhD, and while it is sometimes unnerving, I think it is working well overall. *Have other research students experienced similar problems with making cut-off points for the scope of their research, and if so, any suggestions for dealing with the problem effectively?*

6) My reading has mostly been restricted to work about music, but I feel there must be work in other areas of research that is analogous to my own. I am particularly interested in reading more about approaches to history and historiography research, as well as studies which do a good job of analyzing journalism (especially arts journalism), or anything else that participants may think is relevant to my own work. If anyone knows of any outstanding and methodologically sound studies that parallel my own project in some ways, I would love to hear about them! I’m also interested in how the tension between art and commerce plays out in other areas of popular culture, and if anyone has a good book or article to recommend on this tension in film, sport, theatre, and so on, don’t hesitate to let me know about it.

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<sup>2</sup> The other problem is that the music press becomes less influential after 1980. MTV and other forms of music television become increasingly important to pop music discourse, and in the last eight years internet sites devoted to music have changed the way people use the music press. These topics could merit full-length studies on their own, and I fear I may not be able to fully address their impact in the last few chapters of a PhD.

**Works Cited:**

Frith, Simon. 1996. *Performing Rites*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Giddins, Gary. 1990. "Jazz Criticism and its affect on the art form." *New Perspectives on Jazz*. London: Smithsonian Institution Press.