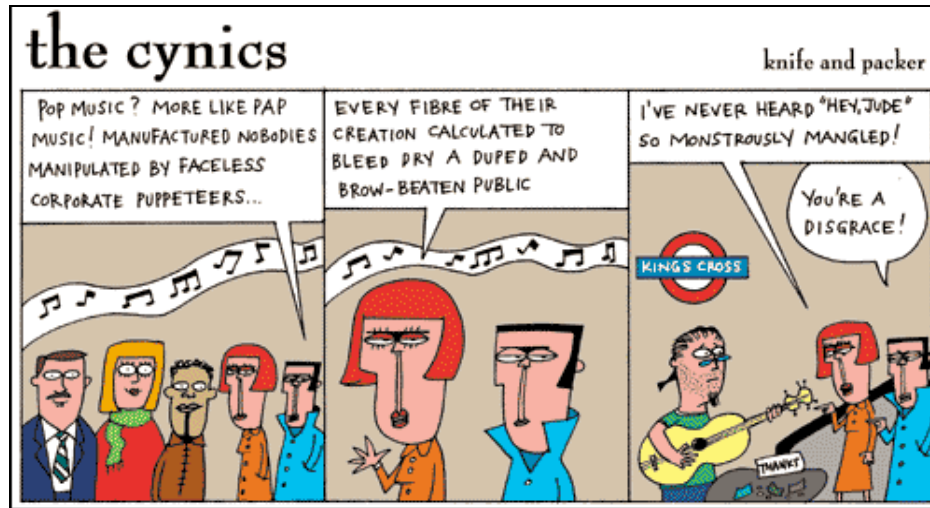


The Story of Selling Out in Jazz and Rock Criticism from *Metronome* to *Rolling Stone*



As we read the Knife and Packer comic strip shown above, we find a satirical retelling of a typical story in pop music—the story of the forces of commerce and their corrupting effect on the creative musical act. If we look back to an edition of the brass-band magazine *Metronome* published ninety years earlier, we can find another version of this story in a column lamenting the “degeneration of our popular song.”

Is it true that there are still a few writers who pride themselves on ... writing good class songs, and who will not prostitute their talents by the writing of degrading ragtime and suggestive songs to please the taste of the perverted public ... Where are our American classic composers today? There are practically none. They are swept aside in the great maelstrom of commercialism.²

What makes Knife and Packer’s comic poignant is not its rehashing of the old story—how the *production* of music is co-opted by a profit-driven industry—but rather its comment on how our *reception* of pop music changes according to our social circumstances; our pair of cynics clearly have a different sense of what it means to “sell out” than the busker (and presumably the reader). Where you draw the line between art and commerce depends on whether you’re a cynic listening to a busker, a jazz fan during the Depression era, or a baby boomer reminiscing about the Sixties. The most significant forum for such distinctions, however, is the music press.

¹ *BBC News Magazine*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/default.stm
Accessed 17 February 2004.

² “The Degeneration of Our Popular Song.” *Metronome*, January 1914: 18.

I am currently in the second year of a PhD in Media Studies at Stirling University, UK, under the supervision of Simon Frith, who is best known for his landmark work on the sociology of rock and pop. The aim of my PhD is to explore the history of the tension between art and commerce in popular music discourse and its relationship to the rise of popular music criticism. I will use the genres of jazz and rock as case studies, and examine the role of music magazines in constructing these two distinct musical cultures.

My project began as an attempt to explain how anti-pop values continue to thrive in “alternative” and “indie” rock music cultures, and I had intended to conduct background research on the roots of this anti-commercial discourse by looking at the history of jazz and rock criticism; but as I started reading early issues of the longest-surviving jazz and rock magazines, *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*, I realized there were enough questions arising from my historical research to constitute a thesis.

A strong anti-commercial discourse underlies both jazz and rock criticism. Jazz is often defined against other kinds of popular music: “real jazz” is not symphonic or sweet jazz, not Louis Jordan, and not Kenny G. Since the birth of rock criticism in the 1960s, a similar discourse has emerged: “real rock” is not Pat Boone, not the Monkees, and so on. Jazz and rock have also tended to exclude one another from their respective traditions, even though there have been numerous moments and ways in which these two genres have shared characteristics, crossed paths, and occasionally collided in dramatic ways—all of this in spite of the fact that jazz and rock are inevitably both art *and* pop, both cultural expression and commercial product.

I want to explore the relationship between jazz and rock criticism to demonstrate how the two genres have been constructed. What can we learn by comparing how classical music critics reacted to jazz in the 1920s with the way jazz critics reacted to rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s? What about comparing the similarities between coverage of youth dance crazes during the swing era and the rock ‘n’ roll era? What changes did *Down Beat* undergo during the commercial decline of big bands and the rise of jazz art discourse, and how did it cover the rise of country, rhythm and blues, and eventually rock ‘n’ roll? How and why did *Down Beat* start covering rock music again (after an eleven year hiatus) in 1967? And what happened to all the predictions in *Down Beat*, *Melody Maker*, and even *Rolling Stone*, “that the future paths of jazz and rock may converge?”

My PhD will explore how the tension between art and commerce became manifest in the popular music press, beginning in the 1920s and concluding in the early 1970s, by which point the two most significant vehicles for popular music discourse in America, *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*, had developed two different discourses to mediate the meaning and history of popular music.

By examining the differences between jazz and rock discourses in the music press, I hope to shed light on how music magazines and the people who worked for them played a part in transforming prevailing ideologies about the histories of jazz and rock culture, and consequently helped to shape the accepted history of popular music.