

The Death of the Critic?:

A Roundtable on the Future of Music Criticism in the Digital Age

Moderated by Ann Powers

Annenberg School for Communication
University of Southern California
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“The death of the critic” has become a catchphrase in discussing how the Internet has affected arts writing, nowhere more so than in music journalism. The avalanche of blogs written by everyone from veteran writers to neophytes has called into question the need for professional music writers. The availability of music in the Internet challenges the old idea that criticism is at its heart about description and assessment: why would a reader need someone else’s words about a song when she can just listen herself? And the shrinking availability of space in print publications, combined with the widespread belief that readers online have the attention spans of toddlers, has made it hard to justify long-form essays on music or anything else.

Yet music writing continues to have an important presence in the culture, and arguably it is a primary pioneering form, allowing for writers to experiment with the new frameworks the Internet demands. At the same time, more great music books are being published than ever, and general interest publications are publishing more writers on pop.

So is music criticism dying or being reborn? Our panel of professionals discusses the perils and possibilities.

The Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. From its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between eleven schools whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media, and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. For more information, please visit www.learcenter.org.

Participants

Lorraine Ali (*Newsweek*)
Ayala Ben-Yehuda (*Billboard*)
Ernest Hardy (*LA Weekly*)
Natalie Nichols (*City Beat*, hipspinster.com)
Tim Page (USC Annenberg)
Randall Roberts (*LA Weekly*)
Oliver Wang (Souldsides.com, Cal State Long Beach)
Eric Weisbard, organizer of the Experience Music Project “Pop Conference”
Chris Willman (*Entertainment Weekly*)

Moderated by **Ann Powers**, pop music critic of *The Los Angeles Times* and 2008 Resident of The Popular Music Project.



Participants

Lorraine Ali

Lorraine Ali is a true Angeleno. She is currently a Senior Writer for *Newweek* in Los Angeles. After rising through the ranks at *LA Weekly* in the early-'90s she soon became known for her writing craft as the music columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and a senior critic for the *Rolling Stone*.

Ayala Ben-Yehuda

Ayala Ben-Yehuda covers the Latin music industry for *Billboard* out of Los Angeles. She joined the magazine in 2006 after producing and reporting for public radio programs like *Marketplace* and *Pacific Drift*. Ayala's articles have appeared in *Newsday*, *Time Out*, *New York* and *Rocks*, and the now probably defunct *Barcelonazine*.

Ernest Hardy

Ernest Hardy is a Sundance Fellow and a member of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. His film criticism and commentary have appeared in *Flaunt*, *The New York Times*, *the Village Voice*, *LA Weekly*, *Millennium Film Journal*. He's written for *Rolling Stone*, the *LA Times*, *LA Weekly*, and *Requests*. His first collection of criticism, *Blood Beats: Vol. 1 Demos, Remixes & Extended Versions*, was published in 2006.

Natalie Nichols

LA-based journalist Natalie Nichols has been writing about music professionally for 20 years. She was music editor of the late weekly, *The LA Reader*, and arts editor of the weekly, *Los Angeles City Beat*, where she wrote the pop culture column *Subaculture*. She's been a freelance contributor to the *LA Times* and has been published in *Los Angeles Magazine*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Reagan*, *Mojo* and other magazines.

Tim Page

Tim Page is currently serving as a visiting professor in both the Annenberg School of Journalism and the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California. He is a distinguished critic and won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1997.

Ann Powers, Moderator

Ann Powers has been writing about popular music and society since the early 1980s. She is the author of *Weird Like Us: My Bohemian America* and coeditor of *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop and Rap*. She is currently the chief pop-music critic at the *Los Angeles Times*.

Randall Roberts

Randall Roberts is Staff writer and music editor of the *LA Weekly*.

Oliver Wang

Oliver Wang has written for many places and done music journalism on the radio as well: *NPR*, *Vibe*, *Wax Poetics*, *the LA Times*, *Open Tribune*, *Village Voice*, *Bay Guardian*, *URB*, *LA Weekly*, *Scratch*. He's very well known for a blog called Soul-Sides. He also has produced music compilations through Soul-Sides.com. Currently, he's co-hosting a weekend Latin/Soul party in Echo Park called Boogaloo and teaching at Cal State Long Beach.

Eric Weisbard

Eric Weisbard organized the biggest gathering of music critics, the Pop Conference of the Experience Music Project (www.emplive.org). He edited the books *Listen Again* and *This is Pop* from conference presentations. He's also been music editor of the *Village Voice*, record reviews editor at *Spin* and an educator and curator at EMP. Most recently, he filed his dissertation, *Top 40 Democracy: Pop Music Formats in the Rock Era*, with the UC Berkeley History Department.

Chris Willman

Chris Willman has been senior writer at *Entertainment Weekly's* Los Angeles bureau for the last decade. His commentary on music has been seen on CNN, VH1 and CMT. He wrote his first book, "Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music" in 2005.

Popular Music Project: “The Death of the Critic” September 24, 2008

Josh Kun: Thank you all so very much for coming. This is quite a crowd. We had originally thought that we were going to have at least 10 people in the roundtable to make sure if no one came, it felt full. So this is great that we don't actually need that. It's really great to see you all on a Wednesday night.

My name is Josh Kun. I run the Popular Music Project at the Norman Lear Center, based here at USC Annenberg, and the Popular Music Project was something I started.

We're in our second year now, and the goal of it was fairly simple, which was to create a space — on this campus under the USC and Norman Lear Center name — for the serious discussion and study of all things popular music and, particularly, to focus on the relationship between popular music in the city of Los Angeles and how that plays out in the relationship between this campus and the city.

Within that, one of the things that I really wanted to do with it, if possible, was to create a bridge between academics and scholars interested in popular music and music critics. Because for me it was always clear that the people doing the hard thinking every single day about popular music are not necessarily academics but rather pop music critics working at daily papers, at magazines, at weeklies, and now at blogs. They're thinking about music every single day and doing some incredibly important work writing liner notes, writing reviews, writing features, etcetera, etcetera.

And so the first thing I did was to try to create a community that didn't exist. A lot of us knew each other from parties or from conferences that we'll talk about actually tonight, but in the city of LA, there was actually no space for this. So that was really a driving bolt of what the Popular Music Project was about, and I'm really happy to say that this event is bringing together and materializing that very idea in one room.

And I'm particularly thrilled tonight that we have Tim Page on the panel. Tim, who is a new, still — I think it's safe to say new — faculty member in the journalism school here, is formerly a major critic at *The Washington Post*, is still writing all over the place, just finishing a book now, and the addition of Tim to the faculty was kind of a crucial step that said that USC, and Annenberg specifically, was invested in creating an academic space for people interested in writing about the arts and pop music. So I'm just thrilled on the Comm side now to look across the hallway to see Tim there and know we can actually have conversations that add to all these conversations here.



JOSH KUN, DIRECTOR OF THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER'S POPULAR MUSIC PROJECT

For me it was always clear that the people doing the hard thinking every single day about popular music are not necessarily academics but rather pop music critics...

KUN



*I want you to know
I went to Goodwill
and got a new jacket
for the event... That's
what a critic does,
shops at Goodwill.*

POWERS

So. I'm going to turn it over right now to Ann Powers, who is in residence at the Popular Music Project, which means she sleeps in this room for the entire year.

Ann Powers: Underneath the little screen.

Josh Kun: She's got TV 24/7. She's thrilled. And Ann is our second resident, and I've just now decided she's going to be resident this year and all of next spring so we can do more things with Ann instead of just one event this fall.

Ann Powers: Yay!

Josh Kun: I'm going to turn it over to Ann, but the reason I wanted to have her as a resident is obviously her central role in the popular music dialog in Los Angeles now in her role as the chief pop music critic at the *Los Angeles Times*. I think I speak for everyone here that when Ann came to LA and took over that job, things changed in the way that popular music was talked about in print in this city. I'm thrilled she's here in the city and I'm thrilled she's here with us today.

So I'm turning it over to you to talk and introduce all of our guests. Thank you all for coming. Ann Powers.

Ann Powers: Thanks, everyone. I want you to know I went to Goodwill and got a new jacket for the event, so, like it, huh? That's what a critic does, shops at Goodwill.

I'm so excited to have this group of people here today, all of you. First off, I want to ask a question. How many of you in this room have, do, or in the future hope to think hard about music for a living, to quote my friend Eric Weisbard here? Good handful. Good handful. How many care about reading thoughtful writing about music? A lot more. OK.

Oliver Wang: They're just not raising their hands...

Ann Powers: How many of you came for the grapes? OK, let's hear it for grapes.

Well, I realize that the title of this panel, "The Death of a Critic?" is a bit dire, and when I first mentioned it to Oliver, he was like, "Oh, no. Call it something else." And he's always right. So I would like to change the title right now to "The Death and Second Life of the Critic" because I think what's really happening is that criticism in all the arts — we're here to talk about music criticism, but we have many people on this panel who've written about more than one art form — is going through a metamorphosis, and this has to do with technology. It has to do with shrinking resources at certain kinds of media outlets, but it also has to do with new



ANN POWERS, LA TIMES



opportunities to tell stories in different ways, to dialogue with our readers in ways that were never possible before, to use multimedia to learn from those bloggers out there that we're supposedly supposed to scorn as professional people, even though many of us are also bloggers. In fact, how many people at this table blog on a regular basis? How many have a blog and haven't updated it for, like, a year?

Anyway, my point is I hope that our mood tonight, as I said or emailed to the panelists, can be hopeful, along with the kvetching and hair pulling that we must all do to have a catharsis together.

On that note, I'm going to introduce our panelists, and then I asked each one to prepare a brief statement on the subject of the current state of music criticism or arts criticism. So I think I'll introduce you first, and then we'll go around and give our little intro, and then we can throw it out and have some questions amongst ourselves.

And, please, this is an open forum. It's a roundtable. We want you to participate and shout us down and join in in every way.

I'm going to introduce our panelists in alphabetical order.

So we have Lorraine Ali, who I've known for a very long time. She's a Los Angeles-based senior writer for *Newsweek* magazine who's written extensively about culture in the arts. Since joining *Newsweek* in 2000, she's written many wonderful features. Recently, you might've read one about the new infidelity. It was really excellent. It got a lot of reader response. Lorraine, as an Iraqi American, has written some incredible pieces about Arab-American relationships and the Iraqi Diaspora overseas. Before *Newsweek*, she was a senior critic for *Rolling Stone*. She's been a music columnist for the *LA Times* and *Mademoiselle*, a car columnist for *UHF*, and a regular contributor to *GQ*, showing us all the different arts and how they intersect. She's won awards, as well, including an award from the New York Association of Black Journalists in 2007 for "Best Online Feature," the 2002 "Excellence in Journalism Award" from the National Arab Journalists Association, and her story, "West Bank Hard Core," appeared in *Da Capo's* "Best Music Writing, 2001." She represents Eagle Rock.

Ayala Ben-Yehuda, who is seated to my right, covers the Latin music industry for *Billboard* out of Los Angeles. She joined the magazine in 2006 after producing and reporting for public radio programs like *Marketplace* and *Pacific*



ANN POWERS, EARNEST HARDY, AND LORRAINE ALI (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT)

Drift. Ayala's articles have appeared in *Newsday*, *Time Out*, *New York*, and *Rocks*, and the now probably defunct *Barcelonazine*. I don't know what neighborhood you rep for.

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: Fairfax and Olympic.

Ann Powers: OK, there you go.

Ernest Hardy, to my left, is a Sundance Fellow and a member of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. His film criticism and commentary have appeared in *Flaunt*, *The New York Times*, *the Village Voice*, *LA Weekly*, and *Millennium Film Journal*. He's written for *Rolling Stone*, *the LA Times*, *LA Weekly*, and *Requests*. He's a contributor to the reference books *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die* and *Classic Material: The Hip-Hop Album Guide*. His poetry has appeared in *The Ledge* magazine and the *Bronx Biannual*. His first collection of criticism, *Blood Beats: Vol. 1 Demos, Remixes & Extended Versions*, was published in 2006 and was the recipient of the Pen Beyond Margins Award in 2007. *Blood Beats: Vol. 2* was published in 2008, and he's got a new project he's working on now. He reps for Silver Lake.

Natalie Nichols. LA-based journalist Natalie Nichols has been writing about music professionally for two, 20 years — 2,000 years! That's me. I've been writing for 2,000 years!

[Audience laughs.]

Ann Powers: She was music editor of the late weekly, *The LA Reader*, and arts editor of the weekly, you might say the now different than it once was weekly, *Los Angeles City Beat*, where she wrote the pop culture column *Subaculture*. She's been a freelance contributor to the *LA Times* since 1996 and has also been published in *Los Angeles Magazine*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Reagan*, *Mojo* and other magazines. And you rep for Los Feliz?

Natalie Nichols: Laurel Canyon.

Ann Powers: Laurel Canyon.

Tim Page provided me with a beautifully concise bio. He is a visiting professor of music and journalism at USC, won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1997 for his writing about music for the *Washington Post*, and what's your neighborhood?

Tim Page: Hollywood Flats.

Ann Powers: Hollywood Flats, cool.



ANN POWERS, EARNEST HARDY, LORRAINE ALI AND JOSH KUN (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT)

That's me. I've been writing for 2,000 years!

POWERS



Chris Willman, another Eagle Rocker attended USC, wrote for college and community papers and *BAM* magazine in the early '80s before starting writing for the *LA Times Calendar*. And then he was at *LA Times*, basically, for how long, for a long time?

Chris Willman: Eleven years.

Ann Powers: Eleven years. Then he went to *Entertainment Weekly*, where he's a senior writer and the main music critic, along with Leah Greenblatt. And he also wrote a really wonderful book called *Red Necks and Blue Necks: The Politics of Country Music*. And, yes, that's it. He reps for Eagle Rock.

Oliver Wang reps for Cheviot Hills, which is —

Oliver Wang: — Rancho Park.

Ann Powers: — Rancho Park, sorry.

Eric Weisbard: But not for John O'Groats.

Ann Powers: Definitely for the golf course right there. Oliver's written for many places and done music journalism a lot on the radio, as well: NPR, *Vibe*, *Wax Poetics*, the *LA Times*, *Open Tribune*, *Village Voice*, *Bay Guardian*, *URB*, *LA Weekly*, *Scratch*. I could go on and on. He's very well known for an excellent blog called Soul-Sides. Also has produced music compilations through Soul-Sides.com. He's a noted DJ. Also was a DJ at KALX-FM, and now he's co-hosting a weekend Latin/soul party in Echo Park called Boogaloo at, what venue?

Oliver Wang: The Short Stop.

Ann Powers: At the Short Stop. He also has a Ph.D. in ethnic studies from UC Berkeley. His dissertation was a social history of the Filipino American mobile DJ community in the Bay Area, and now you're turning that into a book called *Legions of Boom*. Currently, you are teaching at Cal State Long Beach.

Oliver Wang: In socio.

Ann Powers: In sociology.

And you didn't give me a bio, Randall Roberts.

Randall Roberts: I probably didn't.



Ann Powers: He reps for right next to the Hollywood Bowl.

Randall Roberts: I do.

Ann Powers: He's the music editor of the *LA Weekly*. Anything you want to add?

Randall Roberts: No, no. Staff writer and music editor of the *LA Weekly*.

Eric Weisbard: And his 10-day vacation begins the second of December.

Ann Powers: Whoo-hoo! And Eric Weisbard reps for my house — from Mt. Washington, and you gave me a bio.

Eric Weisbard: I did.

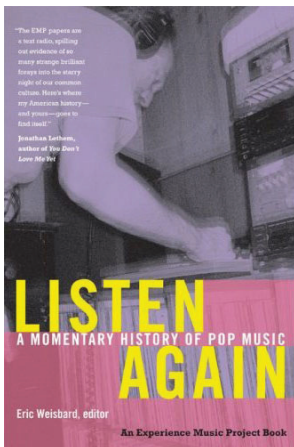
Ann Powers: So nice. He has organized the biggest gathering of music critics out there, the Pop Conference of the Experience Music Project, which I encourage everyone in this room to look into, www.emplive.org, under education. You can all submit proposals to give a paper or a panel. He's edited the books *Listen Again* and *This is Pop* from conference presentations. He's also been music editor of the *Village Voice*, record reviews editor at *Spin*, an educator and curator at EMP, and a writer for a bunch of places. Most recently, he filed his dissertation, *Top 40 Democracy: Pop Music Formats in the Rock Era*, with the UC Berkeley History Department.

And I'm Ann. I rep for Mt. Washington. I've written for lots of places, and I recently interviewed Dolly Parton and Labelle in the same week.

Unidentified Speaker: Sweet!

Ann Powers: OK, so the first thing after that lengthy series of introductions is I asked all of our panelists here today — and I should mention that Laura, Laura Ferraro, who's now been dragged up to the panel also, writes for *NME* (*New Musical Express*) here in the States. Anything else you want to say?

Laura Ferraro: That's about it. I occasionally contribute to the *LA Weekly*, although it's been a while, and *Nylon* is very under the radar. I have to rep for them because they're great.



LISTEN AGAIN AND THIS IS POP
EDITED BY ERIC WEISBARD



Our ability to sum things up well with the benefits of hindsight is often inversely proportional to our cultural impact...

WEISBARD

Ann Powers: So she represents the international perspective.

But let's start with Eric. Let's talk about our — so three minutes to just sort of talk about the state of music criticism and what you think is going on.

Eric Weisbard: OK. Ready? Here's a quick tale of two critics. Sylvester Russell, 100 years ago, scraped by to become the first full-time black professional critic. A former minstrel show soprano, who made it his mission to judge performance quality, cultural legitimacy, and racial import at a time when theaters were segregated and African Americans regularly applied cork to their own faces. Yet, even in an age when a song about a pimp called "All Coons Look Alike to Me" was a hit, to critique black performance involved contemplating self versus collective ambition, the effects of the all-consuming world of nightclub nightlife, and that old perennial, "Crossover Hal" and "On Whose Terms?"

Fast forward to next month when Tom Moon, a former Philadelphia Daily newspaper critic, releases *1,000 Records to Hear Before You Die*, a mammoth life's listening that includes classical, jazz, world music, rock — popular and obscure — hip-hop, and just about anything else. It feels like a summation, the end of an era when listening smartly to albums of every kind, having access to the products of consumption, as it were, could make you a full-time professional critic and when to be a music generalist was to confront in small but, therefore, plausible contexts every aesthetic, and if you chose, political question of cultural pluralism available. As with many a capsule record review, I can only be suggestive here. The role of the pop music critic, the opportunities and challenges she or he faces, changes in every generation. But certain tensions recur.

First, our ability to sum things up well with the benefits of hindsight is often inversely proportional to our cultural impact, which tends to be heaviest when we write our confusion from inside the anguished moment.

Second, how we work is structured by the power dynamics of our time as much as what we work on, and we never recognize this enough because the platform we have doesn't allow us to.

And, finally, our boundary line between performer and audience, mainstream and margin, gentility and extremity, capitalism and play relates exactly to our constant sense of beleaguement and entitlement. So don't be surprised if this same panel is held in 20 years or 40 or 60.

A friend of mine once said that there are too many people in this world, and too many of them make music, which I tend to believe most days.

ROBERTS



But as for the original questions Ann asked us to address: the biggest challenge of being a critic is finding places to regurgitate cultural studies in the guise of record reviews, of which there are fewer than ever.

Most exciting innovation: every time a new database or technology makes thousands to millions of songs or video clips available, that's also a pretty big challenge.

And the place I look for the great criticism besides the pop conference? I wish there was one. And then I concluded that that's the biggest challenge.

Ann Powers: Randall?

Randall Roberts: I was thinking about what I was going to say in my little introduction, and I think the most illustrative way for me to talk about it is to talk about what my day is like as a music editor of the *LA Weekly*, which is this vast information overload of e-mails and phone calls and CDs, hundreds of CDs every week, and all of this information gets piled onto my desk, both figuratively and literally, and I have to wade through all this information and somehow pick out for the *LA Weekly* every week what is deemed the most — I don't even know what — the most interesting, intriguing, from pitches, from CDs on my desk, from publicists who often have good ideas for stories, and this vast amount of information I have to somehow put my mind around while at the same time keep up with what's going on outside of my office.

And I don't think that...I don't know, 10 years ago, I would imagine that it was different. I *know* that it was different 20 years ago as far as the sheer volume of music that's out. A friend of mine once said that there are too many people in this world, and too many of them make music, which I tend to believe most days. But the difference is that in the past, all these people making music, usually it stayed in the basement or in the garage. And I don't know if that's good or bad, but now it's pressed onto a CD or uploaded onto MySpace or sent to me in MP3s. But it's no longer possible for me to — I don't feel like it's possible for me to have a good grasp of what's going on in music in 2008 in America because you always feel like there's something that you're missing, either some movement or some band. Like every day, there's a band who — somebody will mention to me, "There's a band." It's like, "You haven't heard about them? I can't believe. You're the music critic for the *LA Weekly*? You haven't heard about them?" and I start to panic. And that's the world, yes.

Tim Page: I was thinking about my rather long time in this business now. I've been writing about music for 30 years now, and I began at a magazine that used to be quite well-regarded called *The New York Rocker*, which I got paid \$15 for my first review for them just about 30 years ago right now.



And we used to have a joke back in those days, one of those stupid jokes, and it was the joke that went, “Have you heard about the stupid music critic?” And the punch line was, “In it for the money.” And it was hard then. I think it’s harder now in a lot of ways. I think especially in what I’ve written most about, which is classical music, but I would think also in pop and world and all the various different kinds of music that have come flooding into the market since, and actually were there when I was there, too, but it’s an amazingly richer musical world as far as I’m concerned than it was 30 years ago.

What’s interesting for me, though, is that old cliché from Dickens about this being the best of times and the worst of times. When I first got involved in classical music and I started at *The New York Times* in 1982, so that’s quite a while back now, too, there were probably about 100 people who made at least a vaguely struggling middle-class life writing about classical music. Back then, *The New York Times* had something like 13 critics, from pop to jazz around, some stringers, some full-time. *The New York Post*, believe it or not, had four classical music critics. There were two or three newspapers out here. There were four in New York. All of them had their own full-time critic, and this has changed a lot.

In classical music, again — which is my principal beat — I’d say there were probably about 15 or 20 classical music critics left in the country who manage to pay their rent strictly from classical music. Increasingly, you have a “general arts” critic who will be sent out to the so-called highbrow events: film, dance, *The Nutcracker* at Christmas, things like that. And then you also have people who write who work at universities, who like to make a little bit of extra pocket change by covering when, I don’t know, Andrea Bocelli or something, comes to town. So it’s very, very hard now to make a living as a critic in classical music. Probably a little bit easier in other music, but there’s so many more critics in pop music because it’s such a larger group and there’s a bigger spread. It’s really down to about 15, 20 music critics, and we’re losing more all the time.

Just this week, the chief music critic of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* was reassigned because he was giving too many bad reviews to the Cleveland Symphony, then strangely reappointed and reappointed and reappointed before his first tenure came to an end, and they reassigned him. So that’s the bad news.

The good news is that almost everything, if it’s not reviewed in print, is now reviewed somewhere by somebody who is particularly interested in this music, by somebody who wants to tell the town how bad the classical music critic at the local paper is, you know, just in blogs, in comments on Amazon, in comments on all sorts of websites, and I think that’s terrific.

I’d say there were probably about 15 or 20 classical music critics left in the country who manage to pay their rent strictly from classical music.

PAGE

There's always going to be music. There are always going to be people who want to analyze it, want to think about it, want to tell other people about it...

PAGE



I was told I got more mail than anybody except for the guy that did the singles column.

NICHOLS

The problem again, though, is how do you make a living, how do you continue to work, how do you manage to get your stuff in print if that's what you want? I know people who actually are really print virgins at this point, you know. They've written entirely for blogs, and they see absolutely no reason why they should stop writing entirely for blogs.

So my hope is that we are at the beginning of a new generation. There's always going to be music. There are always going to be people who want to analyze it, want to think about it, want to tell other people about it, want to press their opinion, their loves, their passions, their dislikes on the world, and I think they're going to do it. It's just a question of how you manage to do it, how you arrange some kind of workable commercial model, and how you break in. That's another thing which I think all the critics here would probably agree with me on, is that there's absolutely no bar to pass. You really have to invent yourself and find some way in the door. None of us has a similar history, I would assume. Some of us share publications in common, but it's fascinating, and I actually think in a lot of ways the best years may be ahead of us, as soon as we figure out how to make this work. However, the days when they used to send classical music critics or pop music critics, for that matter, first class on an airline are long gone, and in fact, it's very hard to even get sent to the next town. Generally, they ask you to sleep on the floor even at some of the better newspapers. There's a start.

Ann Powers: Natalie?

Natalie Nichols: Thanks. Well, it's kind of weird, I guess, when I think about my career because what so many people are doing now on the Internet and with blogs is kind of how I started, which was I started writing about whatever I wanted to write about. I wrote for this little weekly called the *LA Reader*. I was a music editor. And it was just so loose that it was, "I'm going to see the Lazy Cowgirls tonight. I'm going to write about them tomorrow." That was kind of how it went. And I had the local music column in *BAM*, also, which was the same kind of thing. I'd get — and talk about mail—I would go there every couple weeks, and I would bring out sacks of cassettes because that's the way it was and like three demos or whatever, and I was told I got more mail than anybody except for the guy that did the singles column. So I've always been used to being overwhelmed by the choices, and yes, you're right, there's more now than ever, but I've always been sort of like, oh, yeah, there's just stacks, and there's no way you can get through it all. So for me, when I think about my experience in music and why I decided to start writing about it, I was on the arts staff of the daily paper that I worked for in college, and I hung out with a lot of music fans and a lot of musicians. It was one of those things where it wasn't general like they'd send you to an art show, they'd send you to a movie, they'd send you to whatever. I just started doing more writing about music because that was kind of what I liked. And that's how I learned about it: by reading liner notes, listening to it, talking to my friends that knew more than I did. The Internet didn't



*I just did what I
wanted. I chased
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I went out a lot...*

*I'm not a female
critic; I'm a critic.*

NICHOLS

exist then, so you couldn't go look anything up on Wikipedia. I love Wikipedia. And then as I became more professional, my knowledge grew through all the things I researched because I had to write about it. So for these years at the *Reader*, I just did what I wanted. I chased bands around town. I went out a lot. I wrote millions of blurbs about bands that nobody's ever heard of or nobody really cared about except for the crowd that was there that night or something. This is before alternative rock. It was still college rock. And it was underground, and you could get a lot of grief for using your music to sell beer. Nowadays, it doesn't work like that.

So at some point, I guess 1996, I got the opportunity to start freelancing for the *Times*, and I kind of felt like I was a punk rocker, you know? I was like, I don't do that, that's mainstream — although I have a journalism degree and I'd learned to write as a journalist. So it was a weird situation for me and especially because word was, "They want a female critic. They want a female," and I'm like, well, I'm not a female critic; I'm a critic.

But all my male mentors said, "Just do it. This is how you get the niche, and it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter why. They're looking for somebody. Send your clips in and shut up." So I did, and they called me, and this really opened my world up a lot because for the first time, I had to take assignments. I had to go into places like a Harry Belafonte concert or Natalie Cole concert, and I had to consider it on its own merits. I couldn't go in there as a punk rocker and go, "This is crap," you know what I mean? And, also, that wasn't what I wanted to do. I was sort of bored with, "OK, I've pulled this punk rock single out of the pile and write about it or whatever, called the band or accost them in the club," and there was a challenge of going into another place where I had no idea what I was doing and I had to learn. Because otherwise, it's in the *LA Times*. I mean there's a million readers — not reading the review, but somebody out there's going to go, "She doesn't know what she's talking about," and that was a big motivator for me.

So...I lost my place, sorry. So I became a pop generalist, and I liked it even if I often didn't enjoy it. It was a challenge, like I said, to learn about these artists intelligently enough to write about them. I don't think I was always brilliant, but I was always honest, and I tried to see the appeal in these acts on the terms of their own audiences, as well as in some broader context of "pop is art" or whatever. I had good coaching from Richard Conley and Bob Hilburn and a lot of my older friends. The same ones who pushed me to do the job really helped me.

So time goes by. I end up specializing in weird stuff. I'm the go-to girl for conscious hip-hop. And then teen pop comes around, and it's, OK, you're going to see the Spice Girls and Britney and Backstreet and N'Sync and 98

My basic rule was I'll see anything once. If I hate it, I'm not going back because it's not fair. It's not fair to the artist.

NICHOLS

Degrees and Destiny's Child, and I was like, oh my god. But I did, you know? My basic rule was I'll see anything once. If I hate it, I'm not going back because it's not fair. It's not fair to the artist.

No matter how critical I was, I couldn't stop that juggernaut. But I got to see Bowie, Nine Inch Nails. I saw Rush. I saw Elvis Costello. I saw the White Stripes play Space-land, so I've still got my indie cred.

In 2003, I started a blog called *Hipspinster* (hipspinster.blogspot.com) that was originally in response to the war, like so many other people. I wrote about music on it, too, but the same year, I became arts editor for *LA CityBeat* and my boss, Steve Appleford, was committed to focusing on pop music, so we did a lot of that. And then I also got the pop culture column, which is another way to stretch my writing. And that was fun, too.

But I left *Citybeat* in March. I'm still freelancing for the *Times* but not anywhere near as much as I used to do. The last thing I wrote for them is a review of the Jonas Brothers album, so I guess I'm never going to get rid of the teen pop work.

All right. So the three questions:

The biggest problem I face on a daily basis, to be honest, in my work is finding anything that interests me or I really care to write about or I feel I haven't heard before in a former life. Also, getting assignments, but I'm not trying that hard right now.

The most exciting innovation to me is MySpace because it's brought that kind of immediacy back. A friend of mine will send me a link, and I'll go check it out. I put my old headphones on and I listen, and a lot of it is for local bands so I can go hear them and I really love that. I've seen a couple of bands lately that I really liked, and otherwise I probably would've been like, yeah, whatever. People say, "Oh, they sound like this," or, "Oh, they're really exciting." I'd have said, "I don't care." But now I can hear it for myself, and I can go, "OK, I'll go down to The Knitting Factory and check it out."

What was the last question? One place you look besides your own main publication for great criticism? I don't really have a main publication and I don't read that much criticism, to be honest. I think a lot of rock criticism is terrible writing, and I don't really care that much about other people's opinions. Plus, my day job these days is copy editing, so I read a lot for my work. So I'm more likely, again, to be back in the place I was 20, 25 years ago, where I'm talking to people. Again, the MySpace thing, which is more of a listening thing or listening to stuff that comes in the mail, talking to my boyfriend, who's also a rock critic, or even going out and seeing stuff

and paying for it, you know, crazy. I used to like Ken Tucker in *Entertainment Weekly*. I don't think he writes about pop anymore, though.

Unidentified Speaker: TV.

Natalie Nichols: Edna Gunderson at *USA Today* is really good. I like this guy named Ben Rainer at the *Toronto Star*. You know him? He also has a pop culture column called *Reasons to Live*. For local bands, Kevin Bronson's blog *Buzz Bands* and historically I like Nick Kent, McFarin from way back in the way-back days, and Lillian Roxon's *Rock Encyclopedia* can't be beat for learning some of the basics.

OK, sorry that was really long, you guys.

Chris Willman: I was at the American Cinematheque Sunday night. They were showing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and if you know your Mark Twain, you know there's a scene where Huck and Tom go to their own funeral. And when I was thinking of the title of this panel, I thought maybe that's what that will be like, too, "Death of the Critic." And I'm so glad that Ann modified it a little bit.

But it does hit home, a little close to home, because the job I have is basically a dinosaur job, I think, which is lead critic or co—lead critic at, in my case, a major weekly magazine.

First of all, they're probably not going to be making more weekly magazines in the future, and if they do, they may not be hiring music critics because of the way the music industry's going. So it's funny to be thinking that what we're essentially doing is covering youth culture. But at some point, even when you're reviewing the Jonas Brothers, you start thinking about retirement age and thinking, will there be such a thing as rock critic when I get into my 60s? Probably not. So what's the back-up plan? We'll ride it for all it's worth. But, obviously, there will always be music criticism but not necessarily the guy you look to in the magazine every week or the newspaper on a mass media level, and part of that is because newspapers and magazines are firing their critics, not just in music but in movies, too. But music makes a better target because nobody's buying it.

The scene is splintered. When we decide what to cover every week — and a lot of magazines don't cover music — *Newsweek* doesn't cover music every week. *Time* doesn't — so the only ones that do are *EW* and *People*, at least on a weekly basis, and there are a few newspapers, and obviously, the blog world — but for those of us who have to think of what to cover every week, sometimes it's a challenge. What's going to be the lead review that's going to be the equivalent of the big blockbuster movie? Well, if there's a Metallica album coming out, it's kind of obvious. OK, that's going to sell 600,000

*The job I have is
basically a dinosaur
job...*

WILLMAN

copies, cover that. But there are a lot of weeks where there's no Metallica, there's no Dave Matthews Band, there's no — we're generating fewer stars.

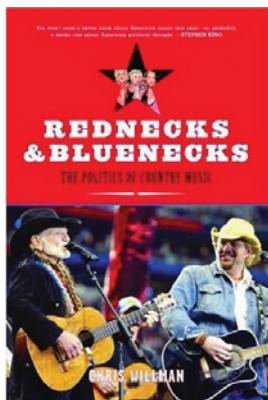
And the old stars are dying, not so much literally as figuratively. So do you give the lead review to some indie rock band knowing that it's going to have — if they're not right for this magazine — zero readership? And I exaggerate a little bit, but when I started with *EW* in '95, I think the music section was the third worst-read section in the magazine. They've kept a lot of those statistics from us over the years to keep from depressing us. But we did have a big offsite conference in November, and I always thought, well, at least we're ahead of books. We're better read than the book section. And sure enough they have new statistics and we've fallen behind books into last place. So, Yea for books!

Yeah, I don't think it's because people are reading books more, unfortunately; it's just because we're doing that badly in music. And so there are a lot of exciting things about the scene splintering, but the future of music criticism may be people writing for their blog about bands in their hometown that are lucky to sell 5,000 units. That's just maybe the future of what we're looking at.

Just a couple other quick things. I don't want to be the guy who just comes and offers complaints and isn't visionary, but that's what I'm going to do. I'm just going to be a complainer, and hopefully, someone here has a vision for the future that I don't.

But to briefly carp about the good old days, I do miss the days when you got to know a music critic because he wrote about everything, and I was sort of reared somewhat on Robert Hilburn, and whether you liked his taste or not, you sort of knew what he was into, and if you liked Bruce Springsteen and U2, then you'd probably give an ear to what he would recommend that was new. And if you liked Jethro Tull and Billy Joel, then you would do the opposite of what he said.

And we still have that with Ann, but there are not very many Anns around anymore where you see them every week in print, and not even at *EW*. I mean I'm co-lead critic, but I think, does anybody really get a chance to know my tastes because you look at the review section, and there's — I probably have the lead once every two, three, sometimes four weeks, so it's not like you're seeing my byline every week. And then you go to the review section — I mean the capsules — and there's eight or 10 of those written by eight to 10 different people. So how do you — it's 75 words to establish some context for how that person sees the world. That's my regret.



REDNECKS & BLUENECKS
BY CHRIS WILLMAN



The space for capsule reading at EW is just barely longer, I think, than a Facebook status update.

WILLMAN

And then, obviously, the Web is the savior of that to some extent where theoretically, quote/unquote, you can do an unlimited number of 1,500, 2,000—word pieces. The down side is that at some place like *EW*—I mean I embraced the Web because you do get some immediate gratification that you don't in print. In print you always feel like you're sending your message in a bottle. Again, to tell you how unpopular music is these days, the lead movie review's always going to get letters to the editor. Back when I wrote for the *Times* in the '80s, if I did a concert review of Depeche Mode or something at the Rose Bowl, I could guarantee that there would be 75 angry letters from kids. Now, there are more weeks than not where of our supposed two million readers, there's not one letter to the editor about the lead review, which is kind of dispiriting.

So it's like Hurray! for the Web because if you write for the blog sections – look, when my book came out a few years ago, I would go to Amazon every day and check my ranking, had it sold any copies that day? Now, it's like that blogging, where if there's reader comments, I log on. OK, please, someone has responded, so then I can feel like someone read this. And then once in a while, you write something that gets 60, 70, 80 responses, and unfortunately, 99% of the time, that's when you write about *American Idol*.

Ann Powers: True.

Chris Willman: And then when you write something you care about and there's zero responses, it's boo-hoo time again.

My biggest complaint, though, about music criticism other than not being able to get to know the critic and his taste and relate to something is just space in print, and it's ever shrinking in my magazine. Back when I started in '95, we had a much smaller typeface, and we didn't have pictures of the albums, and so we actually probably at that time reviewed more albums per month — I'm sure we did — than *Rolling Stone* or anywhere else. We reviewed 20 capsules an issue. Now, we do probably eight, on average, and they're 75 to 90 words generally, except for the lead review, and the space for the lead reviews has shrunk. It used to be up to 800 words, and now most of them are 400 because the layout people want to make the magazine look like the Internet except with much bigger pictures. So if you do read our magazine and you complain about the new redesign, you're not alone because the writers complain most of all.

I was thinking very cynically on the way over here, cynically but realistically, like what gives me the most satisfaction as a writer right now. And I'm thinking it's probably my Facebook status updates, because my *EW* writing prepared me well for that length because the space for capsule reading at *EW* is just barely longer, I think, than a Facebook status update.

And, unfortunately, the status updates basically consist of a punch line for me, and when I write a music review, I like to have more than, consistently more than the punch line. So I think that's the end of my plight, and I'll hand it over.

Ann Powers: Lorraine?

I started writing more about Arab issues, Muslim issues just because I was seeing a lot of stuff out there that was wrong.

ALI



Lorraine Ali: It's just funny — two things that you said — because I write for *Newsweek*, which is also, obviously, a super mainstream magazine, and when you were saying you knew at one time that music criticism was the third least-read section, I'm so glad I didn't know any of that because I thought why is the art section getting smaller and music's getting squeezed out *first*? So I'm kind of glad I didn't know that.

And then the second thing is the kind of feedback you're getting from music writing. It's interesting because I was hired at *Newsweek* as the music critic seven years ago now, almost eight, and I definitely got feedback for the music pieces. But then when our section started shrinking more, the art section, and we had fewer critics, I started writing more about Arab issues, Muslim issues just because I was seeing a lot of stuff out there that was wrong.

So now the mail that I get, the immense amounts of hate mail, is like, "You Jihadist, you obviously married into the clan." That's one of my favorite ones. I'm like, damn, I miss writing about Britney! I miss the silence. But I'll make this really short.

I think the biggest challenges I've had as a music critic — and I don't write that much about music anymore — is that our Arts and Entertainment section was shrinking, and as weekly magazines are shrinking and news magazines, in particular, one of the first things that got squeezed the most was art. So that was frustrating, and so I basically jumped over to the society section, where I write about culture, in general. The good part about that is when I do write about music, it's got to be something I love so much, I'm going to fight like — I can't say the word — to get it in.

Josh Kun: We're all adults.

Lorraine Ali: OK, I'm going to fight like a motherf****r to get it in the section because I love it, I love it. I'm like, OK, yeah, I don't know where that's going to go. Don't put that on YouTube! But I'm going to fight really hard to get that in the section. So in a certain way, it makes whatever I do get out there in music writing now something that I really, really love.

One place I look besides our own publication for criticism? It's not so much criticism now, but I guess it's more commentary about what's going on in the world: I look



I felt like the world and the U.S. and our society and all that was radically changing and music wasn't.

ALI

What happens when resources dwindle and opportunities become scarce, when fear is stoked by diminishing outlets and fewer players on the field?

HARDY

in *The Huffington Post* 'cause I love that. One of the challenges, also, that I found when I was writing about music more than I do now is I felt like the world and the U.S. and our society and all that was radically changing and music wasn't. And I'm like, this is not speaking to the world I live in now. So that was a challenge. I think that's changing, but I'll just make it short. That's it.

Ann Powers: Ernest?

Ernest Hardy: You know, initially when I was invited to participate on this panel, I was going to decline because, as I stated to my friends, I feel like I have one foot and about three toes out the door of this phase of my writing career. I'm currently working on a book on the visual artist Mark Bradford, who's in New Orleans right now building an installation in the lower 9th ward. It's a humongous arc that he's building, and that's going to be the focus of my next book.

But then I started thinking about some conversations I've had this year. I've only had two assignments, paid assignments, to write about music this year, period. And I started thinking about conversations I've had with other critics, especially earlier this year, I was at Princeton for a symposium on James Brown, and so there were black critics and academics from all over the country, and an ongoing conversation we were all having is why can't any of us get work. And so that was one thing that sort of stuck in my head.

The other was that, thanks to Facebook and MySpace, I get emails and messages from critics all over the country. This is an ongoing conversation. Actually, a Latina in New York, who I've been corresponding with for the last six months, said, "You've got to say something about the dearth of people of color and criticism now." And so that is sort of my focus because the death of the critic, the death of the music critic, death of the critic has very specific implications for people of color who write about culture and music. So this is what I wrote.

"The thing that most interests me about this panel topic is a question that's playing out on many fronts in America right now. What happens when resources dwindle and opportunities become scarce, when fear is stoked by diminishing outlets and fewer players on the field?

"As it turns out, we're seeing the answer unfold in political, cultural, and business sectors. To put it another way, when you look across the field of music criticism right now in both the mainstream and the allegedly alternative press, you could well be watching a tape of the recent Republican Presidential Convention. It's a whole bunch of whiteness and maybe a speck of color on the fringe. It's as though *Pitchfork* f***ed *Vice* and now their smug, smarmy progeny are building new plantations atop the rapidly eroding topsoil of access and cultural power.



BLOODBEATS: VOL. 1
BY ERNEST HARDY



This conversation, of course, is rooted in long problematic issues of whiteness being at the center of “journalistic standards” and the process of career-building.

HARDY

“And to continue with the plantation metaphor, the slave shacks of the Internet, blogs such as those written by Oliver Wang and Jay Smooths, sites such as Soul-bounce with its fusion of passion and intelligence, knowledge, and playfulness, and those hip—hop sites that ultimately make you want to bash your own head in from the ignorance displayed, but then will dazzle you with a post of such poetic insight that you want to pen a fan letter. Those slave shacks are what the music and the criticism are still jumping.

“When I started writing almost 25 years ago, Greg Tate, Nelson George, Lisa Kennedy, and countless people of color who were the peers and disciples of Tape, Nelson, and Kennedy, were making serious map-shifting inroads into the worlds of music criticism. But we have devolved, we’ve moved backwards, and there needs to be a serious conversation about the relationship between marketplace volatility and contraction and who’s then left standing as cultural gatekeepers when sh*t turns tight.

“This conversation, of course, is rooted in long problematic issues of representation and privilege in newsrooms, on mastheads, on editorial boards. It’s rooted in long problematic issues of whiteness being at the center of “journalistic standards” and the process of career-building. Because the real problem, much like with the Republican Party, isn’t just the low and shrinking number of people of color; it’s in the mindset that makes the erasure of some and the elevation of others so reflexive and so natural as to go barely noticed or commented upon except by those being squeezed out, and their voices are very easily dismissed, their perspectives are undervalued in the first place.

“That mindset is the old and reigning filter through which much of the criticism written by people of color (those who can even still get writing gigs) is processed, resulting not only in diluted analysis and commentary, but in commentary that circles back to actually re-inscribe a racially privileged status quo and worldview that we should all be dismantling.

“I had a conversation with the great Greg Tate earlier this year in which he observed that many Black folk who in the ‘70s and ‘80s would have been poets and novelists are now going into academia because they have more freedom and possibility to come into their own as creative critical thinkers. I would suggest that the same is true for folk who at one time would have been music or film critics. Now that’s all great for the world of academia, its various journals and university presses, but it leaves a debilitating and collectively retarding void in mainstream cultural discourse.

“This is clearly America’s fork-in-the-road moment in so many ways, and the much vaunted “change” that we hear so much about has to come about on multiple fronts. I’m often asked by young aspiring critics of color what steps they should take to make it. My first instinct is always to tell them to step in some other direction altogether, for their own sake. Everything is in transition right now and no one



I'd say the biggest problem I face on a daily basis is just the crushing workload.

BEN-YEHUDA



AYALA BEN-YEHUDA

has any idea where we're headed or how we'll get there. It's a dicey time for everyone, regardless of race, gender, whatever. But in terms of diversity of voices, politics, perspectives and style, it's more precarious for some than others. And we're already seeing what the absence of those multiple voices and perspectives can lead to. I'm not just talking about colored folks having bylines. I'm talking about the texture and vitality of criticism itself.

"Modern music criticism such as we get in the daily papers, glossy monthlies and fake-alternative weeklies is largely lacking in that vitality. And I don't want to be the one who discourages a potential Obama, Kucinich, or McKinney of criticism — be they Black, Asian, Latino, Arab, male, female, gay, lesbian, trans-gender, mulatto — I don't want to be the one to step on their dream and the possibility of them pushing this sh*t into the 21st century, and possibly even pulling it back into relevance."

Ann Powers: Ayala?

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: Well, I'm pretty different from a lot of the folks here. I'm very new to this field. I've only been at *Billboard* for two years, so I don't have the historical perspective that they do in terms of working in the field.

The other way I'm different is that I don't actually consider myself a music critic. I work for a trade magazine, so I consider myself a business news reporter, and occasionally, if I have time, I'll write a review. But for the most part, what I do is basically, every week, every day, actually, write about the business news developments in my field, which is Latin music, and kind of try to highlight those strategies that may push sales forward or may basically teach people how to make money off of the industry that they're in. That's kind of the function of a trade magazine.

But I'd say the biggest problem I face on a daily basis is just the crushing workload. To give you a sense of where print is at: like all print magazines, our circulation is declining. We're expected to find a lot of other revenue sources, so while I cover the Latin music industry, that means I'm expected to break news to the website, I'm expected to also write a few articles a week for the print magazine. We make money by putting on conferences, so I help plan two trade shows a year. And because we don't have enough staff, I'm also an editor of our business site, our business-business site. We also have a consumer site, which is *Billboard.com*, and then we have a business-business site, which is *Billboard.biz*. So I'm also an editor of that site.

So I'm pulled in 100 different directions all because we don't have enough people to do all the different jobs that are required to pull in money to keep us solvent. So that's my reality.



OLIVER WANG



The common thread is that there is sort of a death that we're acknowledging, which is the death of print criticism, right? It's the death of semi-well-paid criticism, right?

WANG

But the good thing, actually, is I sort of like the fact that I have to focus on things that have commercial potential or some sort of commercial track record. It doesn't mean necessarily mainstream; it just means kind of innovative ideas in business, interesting ways of making money. That doesn't necessarily mean album sales because we all know that album sales are plummeting. So what's cool about it is that I get to cover an industry in a severe crisis, and I get to document that crisis and talk about different ways that people are exploring to get themselves out of it. So I think it's actually a very exciting time to do what I do.

It's interesting to talk on the phone with these high-powered executives who have been in the industry forever, and sort of in a sense, even though I've very new at this, find that they don't actually know what they're doing much more than I do. They're kind of trying to figure things out as they go along, just like everyone else is. So in a sense, it's a bit of a democratizer in terms of trying to cover this industry, where no one really knows what they're doing, and they're sort of all fumbling along. So that part has been really interesting.

So, yes, that's pretty much it. In a sense, when I write a review, I choose to review something if I really like it. The other reason that I would choose to review something is if I like it and also if there is a lot of commercial expectation for it in the market. I don't think a review in a trade magazine sells albums; it doesn't, but what it can do is serve as sort of a calling card for bands that are looking to get booked on TV shows. It can be used as a calling card to get the attention of a publication that's read by a mainstream consumer audience. So it can help people possibly get booked for a show, a concert, so there are ways in which writing for a trade has an effect on what the general public sees, although my audience is actually quite small. So that kind of sums it up, I think.

Oliver Wang: When a friend of mine took a look at who was on the panel, he immediately observed, wow, it's all print critics, right? Most of us here got our start writing in print. But there's no one here who comes from the world of radio. There's no one here who sort of exclusively got their start in the Internet. And I think from that perspective — and since I'm sort of running anchor here — the common thread is that there is sort of a death that we're acknowledging, which is the death of print criticism, right? It's the death of semi-well-paid criticism, right?

But it's not the death of criticism as a craft. I think, if anything, it's not that we're losing criticism; it's that we're being suffocated by the excess of it, right? And this is largely a product of the Internet, where suddenly anyone who wants an opinion can have an audience. To me, this sort of goes back to what you were saying about the lack of voices, a lack of consistent voices. And I think, again, if we're just looking at the print world in that medium, that's true. But to me — we think of criticism as something that's sort of out there in culture, in general. It's not a lack of voices

that's the issue; it's that there's too many voices, and it's very, very difficult to filter through it, figure out who's actually worth listening to, as opposed to the other 900,999 voices that are just contributing to what you would call static, right?

So to me, again, it's not about the death of the critic. I mean there's more critics out there than there ever have been. The trouble is I think what print provided wasn't so much a guarantee of quality, but it provided structure and provided the place where you could go and enact it as a filter, right? If you got a job at a print publication, there was at least some assurance that there would be some stability there and that people whose opinion you liked or whose writing you respected, there would be some consistency there. And I think what we're missing at this current moment is a lack of structure because it's been blown into infinity, so to say.

Let me just sort of leave this, which is that at the Experience Music Project Conference maybe about a year or two ago, we had someone from *Pitchfork* who was arguing that the success of *Pitchfork* validated that music criticism or writing on music has become a race of speed, right? It's whoever's the cheetah. This is the actual metaphor she used. Whoever's the cheetah who can get to the news story first and put it on their site, that's who wins, and that's the new value system: the speed at which you can get a new story to market.

And I thought about tonight, and what I responded with, which I'll repeat here, is that model makes sense for a certain kind of generation and a certain kind of demographic. And when I was in my early 20s, I was all up into that same idea, too, about trying to be the first person to say something.

But as I got older, I was more interested in what we've been describing as sort of the hard thinking of music, right? And that's, to me, what became so much more interesting to read about. And if there's sort of a silver lining in this transition in mediums and the desire but not the promise of sort of a new infrastructure, it's that at some point, those people who want the speed are going to mature, and they're going to want the hard thinking, and that's the opportunity that we need to see, and that's the role that I think we, as writers, are obligated to fill once that generation comes of age, if it comes of age.

Unidentified Speaker: That's a big if.

Oliver Wang: Yes. Well—

Ann Powers: Do you want to add anything, Laura, since I've dragged you up here?

Laura Ferraro: There was just one thing. I guess I might represent sort of a

It's not a lack of voices that's the issue; it's that there's too many voices, and it's very, very difficult to filter through it, figure out who's actually worth listening to...

WANG

more optimistic, hopefully not naïve, point of view, but I feel like there may well be a role for critics in the future as we know it if the publications and the media outlets are able to adapt, if they can — for example, my magazine, *NME*, is one of the main magazines in the U.K. right now, and they're diversifying into *NME* Radio and *NME* Television. They're trying various things. They have on-site blogs from the Led Zeppelin reunion, who are blogging and photographing, and it's up there almost in real-time. And I think if these media outlets are able to adapt to what new readers demand with their mobile phones on the go, just wanting the information now, that there really could be a role, though, that sort of is a bit different from the hard analyses that we were discussing. But I feel like if they're well-written and informed, that there will be a readership for them seeking that out.

Ann Powers: Well, now we've gone around the table, and I just want to quickly go over a few of the points that I heard, and then we're going to talk a little bit for a few minutes, all of us at the table, and then we'll open it up for questions.

So what I heard, what jumped out to me, was Eric talking about sometimes what we get the most attention for as writers is writing inside, this idea of the confused moment, which I thought was interesting.

Randall, echoing something I'm sure we've all felt, the vast information overload, the inability to know what really matters.

Tim, raising a little hope with the best of times, then noting that it's also the worst of times, noting that in classical music, critics are actually losing their jobs, but at the same time, as you said, the public records become more thorough, and that's very beneficial, I think, to us as critics, as well. We can find information that we need.

Natalie, talking about how being a generalist allowed her to grow. I'd love to talk more about the value of being a generalist and how that benefits criticism, in general, and I'd liked her comment about MySpace, as well, bringing back immediacy for all of us.

Chris, talking about having a dinosaur job, which I hear you, man, completely, but also about the immediate gratification of the dialogue on the Web, which is something I'm very interested in, as well.

Lorraine, talking about how arts coverage, in general, is shrinking and then talking about how writing outside of music criticism sort of put you in touch with a different kind of passion from readers.

Ernest, very eloquently talking about the dearth of people of color in criticism, which I really agree with. At the same time, I do think in the blogosphere, there's a fire we could maybe talk about, but you're absolutely right about that.

Ayala, talking about, I think an important point, that the declining circulation in



print demands that we all have to work for new revenue sources, and somebody else talked about this, too, how we're all asked to now blog and do podcasts. And exciting as that is, it's very taxing.

Oliver, talking about being suffocated by the excessive criticism and that print provided structure, which I think is a really good point, and then talking about the issue of speed and how maybe if we can lay back and have some hard thinking, that's valuable, too.

And then Laura, ending on a positive note, with hopefully if publications can adapt, then we can adapt, as well.

So one thing I'd like to bring up to whoever wants to answer this has to do with the issue of diversity, I mean diversity of writers, as Ernest was referring to, but also, here's the paradox that I confront all the time. I feel I agree with what some of you said, that there's so much — gosh, how do you choose? But then it's weird, like everybody, including me, runs out and reviews TV On The Radio the same day, and we're all on the same thing every week. We're in a kind of a lockstep although there is so much more to write about.

What compels us to still continue to write about this small selection of releases, to write on release date to sort of cover things in similar ways, and how does that relate to the kind of explosion of diversity and atomization of both music that's being released and writing on the Internet? So what is diversity right now? Anybody?

Ernest Hardy: Well, I think one of the reasons that you'll see everyone writing about TV On The Radio at the same time is, you know —

Ann Powers: They're great.

Ernest Hardy: Well, and also writers have egos, and they want readers, and they want to write about something that's going to get them a readership. And you might love some band that three people have heard of, and you probably will eventually blog about them, but you also want people to read you, and you want to go to the magnet, and if it's going to be TV On The Radio or the new Kanye or whatever, then you're going to go there. Your ego is going to pull you there.

Natalie Nichols: And the sense of missing something, too, like, "Oh, if I don't write about this, then people will say, why didn't you write about them? They're the next big thing. They're the big thing right now." I think it's also that. I think it ties into what you're saying about ego, definitely.

Also, who's their publicist? I mean who's pushing it? That's one thing. We haven't really had a chance to talk about that, but some of it is about who's

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HARDY



LORRAINE ALI

pushing it, what are they saying. I mean it's not like they're paying you or even bribing you or something like that, but sometimes it's sort of like, how is it being presented to you as the writer? And, again, you do rely on some filters, whether it's a blog you read or something, but some publicists, when they say, "Hey, you know what? These guys are great" — and I mean now TV On The Radio —

Ann Powers: That's a facetious example.

Natalie Nichols: But at the moment when they popped up even, I think people were going, "Oh, well, you've got to check these guys out." And there's going to be professional relationships that you have that will maybe tip you even if you think of yourself as somebody who's like, "Oh, I'm inured to that." But I do think that there's times when you're going to go, "Oh?" or they say, "Oh, well, so and so thought it was great," or, "Somebody else went to the show," or something like that, which I think all ties into what you say about ego.

Lorraine Ali: It's also who's your editor.

Natalie Nichols: Right.

Lorraine Ali: If you're pitching something they've never heard of, it's like, "I've never heard of that. Oh, TV On The Radio? I know that."

Natalie Nichols: That's true.

Lorraine Ali: So that's going to run. And then if you are putting it out there on your own, if you're able to blog about it, how many people are going to click on a blog about water bottles, as opposed to TV on the Radio? It may be out there. You just don't know people are writing about it.

Chris Willman: I think we're less affected by this in LA, but in Manhattan, I think there's like this big bubble that settles over the island where all the voices bounce off, and people get this very distorted view. I have the opposite problem probably of some of you where most of the music staff at *EW*, they're young people, and they're really focused on indie rock first and maybe hip-hop secondarily. And then there will be things that come out that will sell two million copies that they've never heard of because in Manhattan, their friends downtown at the clubs and all their friends are talking about the same bands, and they don't care about what's selling. And that's great if you make a conscious choice to only be aware of that stuff.



But then if you are kind of accidentally ignorant of what is actually popular and people are listening to — I have developed an interest in country music, which no one in New York has ever heard of, so sometimes I have to say, you know, this actually is going to debut in the top five, and maybe we should think about covering it, and they'll say, nah. Or maybe OK, because who cares about the fly-over states? It's not going to impress their friends.

So I'm the guy who actually pours over *SoundScan* every week and looks at numbers and thinks, hey, there's this band called Nickelback. It sold six million copies that none of you guys care about, and not that that means we have to write about them, but it should at least come up in the conversation that maybe this is worth covering not because we have to like it but even just on a sociological level, you write an essay about it or something.

So I'm the guy who's reminding people, hey, this is commercial, and you don't know about it. At other magazines, I'm sure it's the opposite problem where there's one music person up against a squad of editors who have never heard of any of the indie rock bands.

Ann Powers: Sort of along those lines, though, there's been a debate among some critics, many of them in New York, about this idea of "poptimism." Carl Wilson wrote a really cool little book about Celine Dion where he talked about confronting his indie rock-bred disdain and horror at Celine Dion and how to overcome that and sort of deal with the idea that here's this really popular person. How do I confront that? And I think some at *The New York Times* and even Sasha Frere-Jones at *The New Yorker* have been trying to write about more popular artists in some ways versus this idea of more elite indie taste.

I mean, personally, I like to write about the mainstream. I actually enjoy writing about *American Idol*, but I also get rewarded by my editors for that for sure. I mean there's no doubt they're delighted that I enjoy writing about *American Idol*, you know? So how do we balance what sells versus this idea of "what's good" or are such things even valid, are such distinctions things that occur to us as critics anymore?

Eric Weisbard: You know, although a lot has changed, I think the way in which indie stuff perpetuates itself through the yammering of what used to be called fanzine writers and are now bloggers has really not changed that much. I mean, the old "only one person in 100 likes it, but they like it 100 times more than anyone else" idea, if anything, has been reinforced by much of what Tim was talking about. Basically the deposing of the magisterial lead critic has led to a situation where TV On The Radio can do really

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WILLMAN

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POWERS

well in a Pazz & Jopp or a critic's poll because there's 600 eligible people who can vote, 472 of whom have probably done most of their writing in relatively obscure places.

Ann Powers: You should say what Pazz & Jopp — does everybody know what Pazz & Jopp is?

Eric Weisbard: Or whatever critic's poll you want. But the point is, there's ways of aggregating, and TV On The Radio are a great example of — it's not just the New York bubble; I think that's part of it, but I think there's actually now a national and even international way where hipsters can use the Internet to feel like there's way more of them than there actually are. And so—

[Audience laughs.]



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WEISBARD

Chris Willman: I've gone to Coachella with the New York staff; they fly out and go, and all of them will be excited about some bands, and everybody else at Coachella is also excited about the same bands. And I don't want to burst their bubble, but I want to tell them, OK, you know this will sell 25,000 copies when it comes out, right?

Ann Powers: Right.

Chris Willman: But within that particular environment, it's like the biggest thing in the world. And there's nothing wrong with getting excited about that band just as long as you maybe have some perspective that this is not maybe as universally popular as you think it is.

Tim Page: But is that — I mean, my question always becomes, are we responsible for just covering the things which are going to be big hits, which are already bringing in tons of money, or should we be more attuned to the things which are...? I have a number of friends in the pop world, and some of them are pretty well known. You probably know their names. And they're starving, you know? They're just barely getting by. And they don't have the opportunity of a university to bring them in because pop music is still considered by some people not to be on the same level as classical or jazz or world or something like that. And so they have really a hard time making it.

So it seems to me our job as critics should be to support these things and not just to write one more thing about whoever is considered the flavor of the moment. I'm old enough to remember when most of the records that I was really interested in, say, 30, 40 years ago were records which sold a tiny, tiny number. They're still in print now. People are talking about them now. And meanwhile, all the stuff which

was a really big hit, the Lynyrd Skynyrd Live doing “Freebird” for 25 minutes, I don’t think people really want to hear that anymore.

Let me change the subject for a moment, because I want to argue sort of perversely here that I grew up in a time where there was a monopoly, and there was a presorting that went on because there were only a few different record labels. There were three networks on television. We’d all come in the next day and talk about seeing *The Wizard of Oz* on TV because it would play exactly once a year on Sunday night.

On the other hand, our top 40 in those days, which was extremely selective in what got there, I was thinking about the year 1970 and the people who made Top 40 hits that year, and there were people like the Jackson Browne — the Jackson Five, Perry Como, the Beatles, Smokey Robinson, James Brown, people that not many people have heard of except for crazy record people like me, like Emmett Rhodes and Brian Highland. And it was this great mix. You could not listen to Top 40 without learning about a whole lot of different kinds of music.

And that all disappeared in the ‘70s. That disappeared when all of a sudden you started to have hit-rock stations which only played a certain amount of so-called pre-approved groovy rock, you know, black stations which played mainly soul and disco, easy listening stations, which even then were just playing all the ‘70s stuff over and over and did that in the ‘80s and the ‘90s and into the 2000s. They’re still playing the ‘70s stuff over and over.

And I wouldn’t want to go back to those days, but there was something that was less atomized. There was this sense that if something was good and it was aimed at one certain audience, there was a good chance you’d at least hear it, and you’d find out something about it. And my sense is that that’s pretty much gone, that kind of real common language. And I’m grateful that we have such an incredible depth of other things now, but there was something to be said for what they used to call “mid-cult” and I grew up in the golden age of it.

Ann Powers: Funnily enough, at the last pop conference, Bob Crisco, Robert Crisco talked about grieving for the monoculture. This has been something he’s been talking of, and of course, there was a lot of resistance in the room to that, especially from — I was sitting next to the noted Princeton-based scholar, Daphne Brooks, a wonderful African-American scholar — she just was up in arms with the idea there ever was a monoculture. So that’s a great point, and I think a lot of us have been sort of thinking about that issue, feeling overwhelmed.

Sort of related, I wonder... a few of the comments have made me think about the idea of expertise, which is something that is often associated



TIM PAGE

with critics, although I personally have always felt somewhat uncomfortable with being called an expert and prefer to think of myself as sort of an observer, interpreter, trying to figure out what other people love rather than “I know what is the best.” But I’m wondering what you all think about the use of expertise in the free-for-all environment of the blogosphere. How might we change the way we use the knowledge that we’ve acquired and the skills we have to adapt to a more democratic process of criticism? Anybody want to take that one on? Oliver or —

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: Well, I was going to say I don’t feel I need to be democratic because I’m speaking to a very small industry audience that’s looking to *Billboard* for expertise in a niche that they’re involved with. But what I would like to see, actually, more than offering an opinion, I think that I could be of more use and I think our magazine could be of more use and probably more people in the industry would even read us and bother subscribing if we headed more in the direction of taking advantage of the fact that information is so atomized and customizing our information to the needs of the client which is, in our case, the music industry. And so customizing the information that we give and the analyses that we do to their needs and their desires, I think we’d do a lot better if we did that. A lot of them don’t want to rifle through this 80-page whatever-we-do-now magazine full of analysis of things that they don’t find relevant even though they may actually be, but they don’t necessarily see it that way. So to the extent that we can customize our information more, I think will be better, and I don’t think that we should try to appeal to all people anymore.

Ann Powers: What do you think about that? You have some expertise in a particular area of music that —

Oliver Wang: I’m not sure if I understand the question.

Ann Powers: Well, just sort of, how important is it that you are an expert versus — and your taste judgments — how important is that in relationship to other factors and criticisms that might come into your writing?

Oliver Wang: I mean, I think, like yourself, I don’t really consider myself an expert. I think it’s a label that gets placed on me. To me, I’m learning all the time. At the point where I’m not learning, then I’m bored, and what’s the point in pursuing this?

I think for me what I seek from an ideal critic is not expertise, but clarity, something insightful, something interesting. And, again, just to go back to this, the frustration that I have is just the static of excess and that it’s really hard to find those individual voices because you just have to swim through so much to be able to find that.

I think for me what I seek from an ideal critic is not expertise, but clarity, something insightful, something interesting.

WANG



Lorraine Ali: I think that that excess — we're talking about how there's so much music out there and how it's not this mono experience at this point — but I actually kind of disagree. I know that there's so much stuff out there, there is a ton of static. And I think marketing at this point, there's a billion more ways to market that one thing. So you can get on your cell phone. It's on your computer. It pops up when you check your e-mail. It's just in your face constantly. So I actually think in a certain way there's less, there's less that's being noticed.

Ann Powers: Yes. That's what I'm sort of getting with the lockstep idea, too. It's like you can't stop thinking about the Jonas Brothers.

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: I can!

[Audience laughs.]

Randall Roberts: It's a swarming effect, when writers are looking for touchstones. To talk about TV On The Radio, well, that's an obvious choice — not that they're not worthy, of course — but it is "Well, of course, we're going to chime in on TV On The Radio," and that's one less question mark.

Ann Powers: Right.

Randall Roberts: Not that — usually my problem is not less question marks, it's a matter of not having the space to shine a light on the usually 20 or 25 things going on in LA on any given week that are worthy of acknowledgement. And the luxury of blogs is you can write about something in print but then also commit to doing it online, as well, or what you can't do in print, you can cover online.

But I also think it's interesting the role that publicists play. A lot of readers would be very surprised if they saw the roster of one or two publicists — big publicity companies, if you saw their roster — and then you saw, say, this month's issue of *Spin*, the coordination — not coordination but there are people, tastemakers in between the record companies and the critics, and those are the best publicists or the most successful publicists who have the luxury of picking and choosing who they're going to represent. If they decide to represent somebody, that's a big boost in that band's career; they give that band a certain cachet because they handle whoever, you know?

Ann Powers: I want to open it up to questions, and particularly, we have a lot of students here, so I hope we hear from maybe a student first.

But one thing before we do that, strictly on the subject of covering LA, I wondered if you felt, or maybe Natalie, too, since you have worked at a city-oriented publication here, the same swarming effect? There's so much more even happening on the ground now, there's so many more underground events, like millions of shows, how do you choose?

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POWERS

To try to go in there and experience that scene and come away with an impression that you then translate into the daily newspaper or the mainstream paper, that was exciting to me. But it is overwhelming.

NICHOLS



Don't be afraid. We're just a bunch of critics.

POWERS

Natalie Nichols: One of the things for me, for a very brief moment, I actually wrote about local music for the *LA Times*, too — a Sunday kind of column, like a monthly thing. It was again brought to me because they knew that I had done it for the weeklies. And they said we want to know about the scene. What's the scene like? And I'm said, "Well, there isn't just one scene. There's all these scenes." And, again, I took it on because I thought this is a chance for me to look at stuff that I would never — sorry, I just talked about that — that I would probably not know about otherwise, but it's the *LA Times*, so somebody's going to come to me and say, "Hey, check this out."

I did learn about some things. It wasn't as successful as I wanted it to be. They were trying to figure out what they were going to do next because there was all this transitional stuff. But for me, that's always been a struggle. Obviously, I'm interested in punk rock, I'm interested in alternative music and rock 'n roll, but also everything from what's the local hip-hop like, to what is experimental music like, to what are people — like Nels Cline and all of his stuff, which is very well respected in the city, and I actually know Nels — what are these guys doing? There's a little group around these people, but they're very dedicated to what they do. And to try to go in there and experience that scene and come away with an impression that you then translate into the daily newspaper or the mainstream paper, that was exciting to me. But it is overwhelming. It's overwhelming.

Because there has got to be way more stuff out there, and this is just the stuff that's hitting me or that somebody's saying, "Hey, check this out." And you know there's all this other stuff, and somebody's out there going, "Why the hell aren't you paying attention to me because we're brilliant." "Oh, sorry."

Ann Powers: And then there's Latin music in L.A. and if you don't speak Spanish, it's hard. Anyway. So audience, students, any questions? Don't be afraid. We're just a bunch of critics. Yes?

Unidentified Audience Member: I was wondering — I think Laura mentioned this world of immediacy where people want their news and their information really quickly. Have you found that the actual craft or style of your writing and your reviews has had to adopt to that?

Ann Powers: Yes.

Lorraine Ali: Well, in reported pieces, it's a nightmare, because what it's leading to is mistakes everywhere, and it's really bad. And you just read them constantly. And in terms of just reviewing something, I thought it was interesting that you were saying, like this woman said, be upfront. And I've actually found if you want the attention from being out front, that's going to mess you up because no one's going to notice that first one. It's sort of got to build and build and then you can look at it from another perspective and have more time to go over and think about what you're going to do there. But I mean the first one isn't always the best and isn't always the most noticed. So —

Oliver Wang: Oh, yeah, sure.

Lorraine Ali: I'm not saying you're saying that, but I just think it's kind of ridiculous.

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: I have to chime in on that because I'm supposed to write five news items a day for the website, and it sounds like a lot, and it can be a lot. And I have to say, because I post them directly to the Web, there's nobody between me and the nme.com website, and sometimes that's a little bit intimidating. But I think the quality of my writing has actually diminished because I need to do five a day, rain or shine, and I need to crank them out. And I would love to spend three hours, which to me now is a luxury, on the Raconteurs review, but I have to get it done in an hour, hour-and-a-half if I'm going to meet my quota for the day. So that —

Ann Powers: Does that include listening to the albums?

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: I should clarify that a lot of what I write are news items, these are the news items, so I don't actually have to listen to the album.

Ann Powers: OK.

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: But, no, it wouldn't include that. I do that on my free time. Like Saturday morning, I listen to the album over breakfast. That's one. But I think that the quality of writing suffers as a result.

Chris Willman: I enjoy writing more for the website if it has to be done in a hurry, because when I write a review for the magazine, it goes through a week-long editing process, back and forth, back and forth with one editor, and then three more editors have a say on it. And a lot of times there are things that end up in it that aren't in my words and that I'm not happy with, whereas if I write something for the website, especially if it's in reaction to a news event of some sort, but it can be opinionated, then I can just do a stream of consciousness, 1,500 words, and there's like one filter at most. They usually slap it up. And that's — I hate to say it, but I sort of look forward to people dying because they go, "OK, you know this person's work, so write 2,000 words, an appreciation of Isaac Hayes or whoever."

Tim Page: And you can be serious about it, which is so nice because I mean — and this isn't intended at anybody at this table because I've read most of the people at this table's work and I admire it — but so much pop criticism is actually about a lifestyle or a scene or something. I remember reading about 15 years ago in *New York Magazine* of all places, and it

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BEN-YEHUDA

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WILLMAN

was about Courtney Love. And I didn't really know much about that scene. It was when Kurt Cobain was still alive, and I had just started to know a little bit about them, and I was doing sort of a different gig. But I remember reading a four-page article about Courtney Love that told me absolutely nothing about what her music sounds like, just nothing at all. It was all about the scene that she hung out with and how groovy Seattle was and how far out the bands were and how she was wearing her hair this way this year. She was wearing it another way the year before. And it's so insipid.

And it's a little like, also, that whole thing — and this is also not to knock at Roger Ebert, who I think is a pretty good critic when he's writing, but who cares whether your thumb is up or down? I mean, seriously, and who cares whether you give it an A or an A minus? Coming up with the verdict on a work of art is nowhere near as important as explaining how you came to that verdict and what's actually going on in the work of art and not why it's groovy and not just a pure should you go/should you not go?

Natalie Nichols: But it's easier to do that. It's much easier to talk about hairstyles, and that's why people do it. People can't —

Randall Roberts: Easier for the readers.


Natalie Nichols: Well, no, but it's also easier for the writer to write about — either to write about the songs like they're poetry and not to write about the music because people don't understand music, they don't understand how it works. They don't have even a laymen's understanding of how it's put together or anything like that. And I don't mean just readers; I mean writers, too. So you analyze the song as though it's devoid of music. It's just what are the lyrics saying, and that's what the song is... and that's not what it is.

And believe me, I'm no expert. I've worked really hard to understand music as well as I do, which is not that well. But there are people out there who you wouldn't even know it was music if you just read it. If you were just somebody picking up the thing and reading it, you would not know that it was a record.

Tim Page: You often know it wasn't poetry, though.

Natalie Nichols: Well, yeah, but I mean reading, analyzing the lyrics.

Eric Weisbard: I want to stick up for hairstyles for a second. I'm incredibly bad at knowing what they are, so I'm really the wrong person to make this argument, but I actually think that one of the reasons why music writing is less popular these days is that the connection between music and evolving social identities is maybe a little



People don't understand music, they don't understand how it works. They don't have even a laymen's understanding of how it's put together or anything like that. And I don't mean just readers; I mean writers, too.

NICHOLS



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WEISBARD

less immediate. I think for many different kinds of people, for much of the 20th century, there was a way in which music was the canary in the coalmine for pop culture. It was the place that people entered that world for the first time, and all the upheavals around that happened. And it happened not all at one time but for different groups at different times around the world, and it's still happening in certain places, but it's not happening as much in a kind of vivid first-time way in this country.

Unidentified Audience Member: It's been an hour-and-a-half, and you're the first person to mention that the content of the music has some importance or relevance to culture. I think one of the reasons why a lot of music journalists are writing about music in general, that it no longer has impact, is because it isn't treated that way. Almost all the conversation, I think, is partly related to who you all work for and the commercialization of both the music business and all media in general; there's very little purpose behind what you're doing except to satisfy a kind of need to — not fill space — but more just to report on.

And finally someone said you have to care about the music and you have to have a point of view that then penetrates all the clutter, so you as a writer have a voice, and you could pay attention to it. You can't do it in 75 words in *Entertainment Weekly*, with four editors between you and how it comes out.

So it's not a criticism of anyone here, but I think it's really a function of what's happened to pop culture and actually all media coverage, in general. It's sad, but so people don't go to that newspaper or magazine to really find out what's going on. It's just generalized too much, and there are other places to go. I'm sorry to keep going on, but—

Ann Powers: Well, I would like you to clarify that because what I've heard you say is you have to care about the music, which would sort of implies what Natalie was saying, like you have to know the music. But then you seem to be pointing out that you have to be talking about the larger culture. What is it that you're not getting?

Unidentified Audience Member: I think — and I'm not saying it because you're here — one of your *American Idol* columns, the one about the Beatles was a really good one. It was one of the best things on it. *American Idol* is hard to read about. It's disgusting, and yet it's part of—

[Audience laughs.]

Unidentified Audience Member: — all of our lives. But it's an important thing you're writing. You're writing about something very mainstream, very popular. You created a context for it and an historical perspective on

it. So you didn't say it was crap; you said it was good for what it is, and what it is is a kind of crap and here's why, for what it does to the Beatles' music. I don't think a lot of this journalism has a context or a meaning anymore.

Ann Powers: It's not connecting to the larger culture?

Unidentified Audience Member: No.

Lorraine Ali: Which is exactly what I said when I was talking about why I'm not writing about it anymore.

Unidentified Audience Member: I mean grunge rock that really connected to the culture —

Ann Powers: Believe me, the Jonas Brothers connect to the culture. I have hundreds of e-mails to prove it. Seriously. I'm not kidding.

Unidentified Audience Member: I mean I guess Britney and these teen people do to the teenyboppers, but I think that adults, let's say —

Unidentified Audience Member: She moves people's lives.

Unidentified Audience Member: I'm much older, and I've read every single thing you wrote in *New York Rocker* probably, and it was a time when music was a main fulcrum of how culture changed. And now, unfortunately, even bands themselves are much more of an occupation. When you're 15, you already know how to sell your music. There's a much different impetus, and unfortunately, if the Clash arrived today, I'm not sure they'd have any time to do that.

Ann Powers: Well, I don't know about that. I always found that whenever I make — I thank you for the compliment, by the way — but whenever I make a generalization, then something comes along to disprove it. It's part of the swarm. It's part of what you're saying. If I say, "Wow, Rage Against the Machine still seems to be leading progressive political music." And then the next week, the guy from Against Me! puts out a totally topical CD. And I got 25 e-mails saying the Flowbots are where it's at. So I think it's all happening. It's just hard to know, it's hard to focus on that. I mean that's sort of where this is all leading.

Oliver Wang: I don't think that music's any less life-changing to today's 15-year-olds than it was 10 years ago or 20 years ago or 30 years ago or 40 years. I understand the complaint because I feel it in a way. But to me, it's a generation gap. I really can't believe that for young people — I feel old saying that phrase — that suddenly music doesn't matter and it doesn't change their world.



I don't think that music's any less life-changing to today's 15-year-olds than it was 10 years ago or 20 years ago or 30 years ago or 40 years.

WANG

Ann Powers: Young people are here in this room! Tell us! Does music matter to you?

Chris Willman: I'm going to do my generation gap.

Unidentified Audience Member: I work in the School of Music, and I work with all the incoming freshmen, and I have a lot of them working in my office. And I ask them when they come in "What are you listening to?" and surprisingly enough, nine times out of 10, they tell me the Beatles. Is that wild?

Eric Weisbard: The monoculture lives! Whoo!

Unidentified Audience Member: And there are the kids from flyover states who tell me that Jimi Hendrix has changed their lives. And I think, OK, as long as you guys keep doing that, we're OK. I think it would surprise you if I told you what my kids are really listening to.

Ann Powers: Yes, our silent table partner!

Unidentified Audience Member: I'm curious about the sweet spot, though. I live in Los Angeles now, I'm a publicist and I teach at USC in the Annenberg School. Right now, my specialty is arts and culture, but I used to work at Atlantic Records, and I handled Nonesuch for quite a while. And Nonesuch, if you don't know, is a very specialized label that is very eclectic and has a lot of different things. And what we found — and it's been a while since I had that job — the one publication or the one outlet that moved more records than anything else was National Public Radio. First it would be Morning Edition and then ATC and then kind of went down the line in terms of popularity. And you were talking about seven-minute spots a lot of times. They would either be a feature on the band or a review. And what they found is that the people that listened to National Public Radio were actually people of maybe a Nonesuch generation, maybe a little older, maybe 30 to 40, and that they were the ones that were going out and buying the records.

And I wonder — because we've talked about the problem with print — but I have to believe that there are publications that exist and outlets that exist that actually move records. Like National Public Radio still moves records, and people that are looking for quality writing and quality criticism listen to that and make the decision to buy. And Nonesuch is still a quality record label where you can count on people buying a Nonesuch record no matter what artist it is because they know that it's going to be great most of the time. And they know when they listen to NPR, if it's on NPR, it's going to be great. And people take that chance. So maybe there are other ways to look at it in terms of what are the things to do to get that sweet spot with those two examples.

*Young people are
here in this room!
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POWERS



*I was listening to David Cook's new single today, which is the biggest piece of sh*t I've ever heard, and yet, I know that people will respond to it emotionally, and that as horrible as it is, that emotional response will be honest in a lot of cases.*

WILLMAN

Ayala Ben-Yehuda: Yes, it's all about that niche following. NPR does move records because they have that older audience that still buys physical products. *Pitchfork*, actually, much as we love to beat up on it in this session, they do move records, too. They pretty much broke the Arcade Fire in the U.S. And I looked at how many records the album had shipped when it came out, and the review ran two days before the album came out in the States. This is a band from Canada that no one had ever heard of at the time here, and it was the biggest selling record for Merge Records at that time. So it's rare that you could draw that correlation, but there are publications that have that niche audience where you can actually see the effect, and NPR's one of them. Say what you will about *Pitchfork*, but it does that job for certain bands, too, because they have such a devoted audience.

Ann Powers: I don't think there's been — compared to most times I've sat around with critics, *Pitchfork* has not been bashed that badly today.

Lorraine Ali: I don't think so.

Chris Willman: Can I say something that will piss off all the college students here?

Ann Powers: Please do.

Chris Willman: I don't want to get into like a whole greatest generation thing about "the '60s rule" and all that, even though I kind of feel that way, but when Oliver said that —

Ann Powers: Everybody knows the '80s rule here.

Chris Willman: But Oliver said that young people feel as passionate about music today as they did in the '60s and '70s, I sort of feel like that's true in one sense and not in another. And my sense — my big complaint about indie rock is that people who are really into it and they're very passionate, but a lot of it is kind of a collector mentality, like how many songs can I put on my iPod rather than loving the one song that like is changing your life. OK, now everybody can beat me up after. But I feel like there's more of a brand mentality to a lot of the bands. It's missing the emotional connection.

And I was listening to David Cook's new single today, which is the biggest piece of sh*t I've ever heard, and yet, I know that people will respond to it emotionally, and that as horrible as it is, that emotional response will be honest in a lot of cases. And I don't see that kind of emotional response to Vampire Weekend or whatever, which is —

Ann Powers: We did see it for Arcade Fire.

Chris Willman: It's extremely clever and very well done —

Unidentified Speaker: Have you been to a Vampire Weekend show, though?

Chris Willman: — but I grew up wanting that emotional connection with the music, and I'm not finding that so much in the really clever —

Randall Roberts: Man, I go out all the time, and if you go to The Smell on a weekend, it's crazy. It's crazy. If you go see F**ked Up at the Echo-Plex, it will blow you away, the people getting into music.

Chris Willman: And what are they reacting to?

Ann Powers: We've got to round it up.

Randall Roberts: They're reacting to the music. They're reacting to screaming and playing guitars. The same thing that you were reacting to in 1967; they're reacting the same way now. It was incredibly inspiring going to see F**ked Up.

Chris Willman: Where is this Echoplex? I might go see it.

Randall Roberts: It's in Echo Park.

Chris Willman: OK.

Josh Kun: I just want to respond really quickly to Chris's comment because I teach a department music course here at Annenberg every year with about 200, 250 students in it on popular music in American culture, students of all levels. And the first assignment I make them do is they all have to write a three-page paper that talks about the one song that has done something miraculous to them or affected them in some way, in some major way. And of those 200, 250 papers, I'd say I'm lucky if I know — and I feel like I have a pretty good grasp of what's out there, present, past, present — I maybe know half of the artists that they talk about and are writing about with deep, intimate passion. And they make me want to then go and listen to it. But their grasp of contemporary music but also music from the past, is so diverse and so felt and so real that the generation gap, to me, though it exists in other ways, on that level, is gone.

Ann Powers: OK. We're going to take this row of questions. Start with you.

Unidentified Audience Member: As, if you like, the money moves away from the critic and you can get many more, do you see any change in power between the old pluggers, the publicists, and the critic? Is this change actually going to provide anything beneficial for us?

Ann Powers: Well, one thing I wanted to say is that one of the problems of blogging, especially now that most mainstream publications have blogs — and our blog editor, Margaret Waffler is also here — is that oftentimes — now that I say this, I realize it sounds negative about our blog, which I don't think is true — but oftentimes, blogging ends up as just rewriting a press release, like a lot of stuff you see out there. So in a weird way, that gives the publicist a lot more power. We really try to report our stuff out, and we have a lot of Q&As and reporter stuff on our blog. I'm sure you do that, too. But I think that is giving the publicity machine more power in a new way, and I find that somewhat distressing.

On the other hand, I think you can discover stuff on MySpace and you don't need a publicist. So it's sort of a two-edged sword.



It's shocking how many people will actually just take whatever you've written, throw their name on it, and publish it as a review. Talk about controlling the message.

PAGE

Randall Roberts: Then there's also like a scramble for the exclusive MP3 —

Ann Powers: Yes.

Randall Roberts: — so that, yes, I will write about your band if you can give me the MP3.

Ann Powers: And that's replaced the exclusive interview. It used to be like no one could talk to an artist, but...

Tim Page: You know, one thing that I would advise those of you who are going to write books or put out your own records, is write your own liner notes and write your sleeve copy because having produced records and having done books, it's shocking how many people will actually just take whatever you've written, throw their name on it, and publish it as a review. Talk about controlling the message.

Ann Powers: I hate to say this, but I would love to take all of your questions, and I know both you two have had your hands up a lot of the time. So Josh told me to take one more question; I'm going to take both, but you can only talk half the time you wanted to. Quick!

Unidentified Audience Member: All right. I'm an arts writer with the *Christian Science Monitor*, and I wrote an article last month on this very question.

Ann Powers: I think it was on our website.

Unidentified Audience Member: And I got a really interesting response from David Brown, who was formerly the head music critic at *EW*. I'd like to toss it into the mix and see what you guys think.



Music criticism in most print publications is to me dead, it's over.

He says, "I'd like to add one note to the piece. Often with music criticism, it isn't just the influx of Internet voices; it's the fact that those new voices are actually opinionated. Music criticism in most print publications is to me dead, it's over. Everything is three stars and up. Everyone champions everything. When is the last time you read a mixed review of a major new release in *Rolling Stone*, [inaudible], etcetera, etcetera. At least the Ste-reogums who blog to the world will tell you if somebody's good or sucks. No one else does anymore."

What's your take on that?

Ann Powers: Anybody want to take that one?

Lorraine Ali: I think that there's plenty of negative reviews out there.

Oliver Wang: I would agree with the idea. I mean it's not that there are no negative reviews, but in terms of how mediocrity and up becomes the review, I think there is a disincentive to run negative reviews. In hip-hop publications, which is where my main experience in the '90s came from, that was really the case because no one wanted to offend someone —

Ann Powers: Because he would get punched out.

Oliver Wang: It wasn't about that, it was really about the money. And I think that has changed things a lot.

Ann Powers: All I'll add is that I actually hate star systems and grades. I agree with what you said, Tim, so for me, it's like three stars is kind of a protest. I probably shouldn't say that. That was like, "Well, screw it. I'm putting on three stars then." It means nothing. But I — that's probably immature of me. Did you have one last comment?

Unidentified Audience Member: I just want to say I love music, as well. Music is sort of part of life and it's something that really moves me. And I was sitting here thinking, why don't I know any of you? I don't know any of you guys on the panel. Why don't I read you? I think I realize there's this generation gap here. I feel like a lot of the critics have become too jaded with their generation, they believe they're the best.

Ann Powers: What do you read? Where do you read? Who do you read?

Unidentified Audience Member: Who do I read?

Ann Powers: Who are your favorite critics?

Unidentified Audience Member: I read forums. I love people I can connect to.

Unidentified Speaker: But specifically.

Ann Powers: But where do you read? OK, player forums, obviously, because you're wearing the t-shirt. But what writers?

Unidentified Speaker: Give us some names.

Unidentified Audience Member: There's no writer.

Unidentified Speaker: The fact that you don't know us, we shouldn't feel too bad.

Ann Powers: No, but I do think it's an interesting note because I do think there's a lot of peer dialogue that's replaced looking toward a critic. That's very true.

Unidentified Audience Member: I think in the future this is going to change, because, yeah, I'm not going to always follow a single writer. Why would I want to just follow a single critic?

Ann Powers: Give it a try.

Oliver Wang: It's not about agreeing with a critic. I mean who out there in the world do you share exactly the same opinions with? I don't even share the same opinion with my wife, and I love my wife, right? It's about respecting someone.

Ann Powers: I always agree with your wife.

Oliver Wang: There's a really big difference between agreeing with somebody —

Eric Weisbard: Just because she's here, Oliver.

Oliver Wang: And part of the echo chamber effect is — and this doesn't just apply to music criticism; it applies to politics; it applies to so many things — You just want to hear other people who agree with you. And I think it's become anathema to accept opinions that run counter to what people read.

Ann Powers: Wait a minute. This determined guy didn't put his hand down when I said he had to, so he may speak, and then we're done.

Unidentified Audience Member: Well, I'm a high school English teacher. I teach AP English, and I've noticed a real change in the students. I'm at a pretty affluent school, and these kids that think that they have to go to UCLA or USC, they're really



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POWERS



It's hard to find real critical thinking, which these kids need. They just don't do the critical thinking anymore.

disappointed because they're trying to get into Ivy League and Stanford. They're smart. Their SAT scores are high. But the AP English language is great because it's all nonfiction writing, and I can pick out anything I want, and we discuss it. And I do a lot of criticism because I'm a review junkie. But I can't do things that I used to do anymore. I used to start off with Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'". Ten years ago, they were intrigued by it even though they didn't understand the references, they didn't know who Carmen Miranda was or anything, but they were intrigued by it. Today, they just hate it. They absolutely hate it. They will not read it.

So then I'll pick out someone: OK, who do you like? *Atmosphere*. OK. I've got a Robert Crisco review of *Atmosphere*. They couldn't understand it.

[Audience laughs.]

Unidentified Audience Member: I think that's what has happened to critics, and with more capsule reviews, it's hard to find real critical thinking, which these kids need. They just don't do the critical thinking anymore. And so I'm curious with Josh's kids, how were they written? I mean those 300 essays. Because the only thing my kids like is sort of Nick Hornby, when he would write about a song, and it was very personal, and they could relate to sort of the personal, but they couldn't relate to any sort of objectivity or critical stance behind it. It was difficult. I guess I'm fearful for the future if that's disappearing.

Josh Kun: Well, just one thing I'd say, and I wish he was here, is there's a really wonderful organization called A Place Called Home, involved a little bit in the Popular Music Project in South Central. It's an after-school spot, and they have an incredible music program. And one of the guys who runs it, Monk Turner, has a thing he calls "Hip-hop Tuesdays," and it's a music review Tuesday. All the kids who are elementary, junior high, and high school have to get up in front of each other in the room and do live music reviews of new records that have come out on that Tuesday. And they learn how to talk to that music critically but also personally, obviously, with their peers. So I think that one of the many answers is that education can happen in places that people don't think it's happening in terms of how you talk about music.

I want to say that we've got on the Popular Music Project Website, which is www.usc.edu/pmp, a series of articles on this very subject that you can link to and read more about.

I encourage all of you to stay in touch with the writers and also stay in touch with me through the Popular Music Project Website and our email list so we can keep this conversation going in many different ways. I want to thank every single one of our amazing roundtable. Thank you.