

MUSIC PRESS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This article will analyze in depth the evolution of the popular music press, from the first magazine released (Billboard) to what we know today as digital media. Matters such as which one is more relevant nowadays and how they are related to each other will represent major points of this research. Press has greatly evolved throughout the years and its influence on the consumers is essential when it comes to define a musical era. Professional writer's reviews about music content represented the main source of discovering new music in the past, but now with the existence of the Internet they have slightly been replaced with bloggers, vloggers and YouTubers. The history of the popular music press is a pivot in defining the modern media which is why this article will give a summary of what happened at the beginning of music magazines and how they influenced the consumers' preferences. We will analyze the role of emblematic publications such as New Musical Express and Melody Maker in the music industry and in promoting new genres of that time.

Keywords: music, press, Internet, magazines, social media, reviews

In this world dominated by the digital realm in which kings such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music and significantly more inarguably influence our preferences, preserving and protecting the traditional media have become a challenging task. The power of written press in the format of newspapers, magazines and fanzines has alarmingly started to be diminished, causing a loss of interest in reading pertinent contents, opinions, insights and suggestions put at our disposal by professionals, qualified people who aim to masterfully reflect today's reality.

The Internet is an open platform that has created strong connections between people, facilitating the inaccurate (re-)transmission of information which obviously has led to severe factual alteration of it. Is it totally true what we read every day? How confident are we in the sources that we use? These matters are just a few among many others, but the main question is: 'Which one is more relevant: print media or the online alternatives?'. Regardless of the area, this problem still takes its toll on the credibility of the information and creates profound concerns for media consumers.

The music industry would be a proper example that underpins the idea that the Internet completely changed its progression throughout the last decades. History proved that popular music magazines played a key role in shaping and promoting the artistic movement, being a 'vital component in the connection of music production to music listener and also music maker'³, but have the online blogs, vlogs, magazines, podcasts and streaming platforms succeeded in replacing the old-school ways of reaching the audience? A thorough analysis of what the relationship between media publications and the music industry is and how music magazines and digital media are connected, taking into account the evolution of the press, will shed light on the skepticism regarding which sources are most reliable.

³ Simon Warner, 'Chapter 25: In Print and On Screen: The Changing Character of Popular Music Journalism', in *The SAGE Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. by Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (London: SAGE Publication Inc., 2015), pp. 439-455 (p. 439).

Since the release of the first music magazine which was Billboard's in 1894, popular music publications used to underlie the expansion of the music industry. Both United Kingdom and United States' music journalism was influenced by the establishment of the trailblazers in the music press. In the 1960s magazines such as *Crawdaddy* and *The Village Voice* set the ground for others to follow such as *Rolling Stone*, *Creem* and *Who Put the Bomp*. *Melody Maker* first appeared in 1926 and represented a starting point for the British music journalism, 'the grandfather of the weekly rock press'⁴, ultimately being followed by *NME* and *Q Magazine*. At that point, these music publications were the essential pillars for the record buyers, 'the supreme arbiters of taste'⁵, as their main target was to promote high-quality artists whose creations would stand the test of time. Their reviews, columns and opinions were crucial factors in the music industry's rise because not only did they represent the main source for discovering new music, but their trustworthiness guided the readers towards talented musicians by fairly writing about what they considered to be original content of a high standard. The writers' flair for searching and finding remarkable, diverse-genre records also set the road to success for many incredible artists. Readers were exposed to critical, objective points of view about the structure of a noteworthy song or album, the quality of the melody and its attractiveness via well-founded reviews.

Since the beginning of the popular music press, both British and American magazines drew the readers' attention by focusing on specific genres which changed in time because of the outbreak of multifarious artistic phenomena. Initially, *Melody Maker's* area of interest was jazz, but various sounds were emerging and other publications such as *Record Mirror*, *Disc* and

⁴ J. Hunt, 'Mirroring the Melodies', in *The History of Rock*, ed. by M. Heatley (London: Orbis, 1986), pp. 1326–1328 (p. 1326).

⁵ Jess Thompson, 'Music Magazines Are Our Portal To The Past; Their Survival Is Vital', <<https://blog.discogs.com/en/music-magazines-are-our-portal-to-the-past-their-survival-is-vital/>> [accessed 1 April 2021].

NME had started to write more about folk, pop, dance music, R&B and mainly rock'n'roll, so MM was about to slightly lose its audience, a threat which urged the magazine to make an editorial twist. The paramount importance of the British publications would leave their mark on the music industry and its evolution. The strong link between popular music press and the music industry depended on how the magazines would reflect the musical trends and comply with the adjustments of music paradigm. Back then there was no YouTube Trending, just reviews and charts that would define an era. NME made a game-changing decision by inaugurating in 1952 the Top 12 best-selling singles which certainly had a prodigious impact on both readers' loyalty and the music industry itself.

Despite putting on the market the first music magazine, there was a delay in the US media landscape in concentrating on popular music. The magazines' attention on rock music rather than pop was highly reflected in the way the reviews were created but unlike the situation in the UK where the music publications were pure gold for passionate consumers of records, the impact of the transatlantic press on the readership and the ceaseless changes in the industry were incomparable to the British one: 'The rock press in the US has never affected musical trends or record sales as greatly or as directly as its counterpart in the UK'⁶.

Music critics' professionalism required to build a stable relationship between their musical values and the targeted readership. Their opinion tremendously weighed in the reviews of the albums that were increasing the audience of a specific genre. Still, it is difficult to stress the music writers' mindset that lies underneath their work as the final product for the consumers consists only of musical facts and objective viewpoints: 'We know very little about critics'

⁶ J. Tamarkin, 'Paging the USA', in *The History of Rock*, ed. by M. Heatley (London: Orbis, 1986), pp. 1329–1331 (p. 1329).

own values beyond those that relate to music itself. What music critics and journalists believe their work to be bears scrutiny⁷.

In 1972, NME hired Nick Kent, a true rock'n'roll critic, 'no writer in Britain was more rock'n'roll than Kent'⁸, who saved the magazine from collapsing. Since then a music journalist's approach has been nothing but a lifeline for both specialized publications and the music industry itself. Kent's direct access to insights into glorious bands and artists of that time such as The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and David Bowie represented a milestone not only for him, but also for the record consumers as the critic could write properly about the quality of the rock'n'roll albums. This way his reviews of the music back then were becoming more and more well-structured, suggesting people what to buy and how to listen to rock music which then reached its peak. The music journalism in the US was also marked by prominent critics such as Lester Bangs, Jim DeRogatis and Robert Christgau, the latter being the 'originator of the "consumer guide" approach to pop music reviews'⁹, a method which would be emulated by many others and applied even in the Internet era.

Today's world is defined by the digital platforms in which the access to any kind of information is swift and ubiquitous. Music is everywhere now as the 'Internet has become a "normal" tool for music listening'¹⁰ but is this change beneficial to both the artists and the consumers? More problems regarding the quality of the music streamed online, the algorithm of the suggested artists, the fairness in musicians' monetization, royalties and the professionalism of the music bloggers and vloggers create concerns within the music industry and the

⁷ Steve Jones, 'Introduction: Popular Music, the Press and the Written Word', *Pop Music and The Press* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), pp. 1-15 (p. 4).

⁸ Kevin EG Perry, 'Legendary NME scribe Nick Kent shares his tallest tales: "Going to extremes gets results"', NME < <https://www.nme.com/features/nick-kent-tallest-tales-unstable-boys-sex-pistols-axl-rose-2884679>> [accessed 5 April 2021].

⁹ Steve Jones, 'Introduction: Popular Music, the Press and the Written Word', *Pop Music and The Press* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), pp. 1-15 (p. 4).

¹⁰ Sofia Johansson, 'Online music in everyday life', in *Streaming Music*, ed. by Sofia Johansson, Ann Werner, Patrik Åker and Gregory Goldenzwaig (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1-43 (p. 30).

written press as people now have the tendency to find music streaming more reliable than the contents of popular music magazines: ‘A commonality between consumers is the want for a free streaming service that has minimal to no ads and is available on mobile devices’¹¹. This lackadaisical and parsimonious perspective deeply affects the artists and their labels: ‘According to music industry professional Tom Silverman, “97 percent of the world never buys music — not even Adele”’¹².

Nowadays, a friend, the radio, Spotify, ‘often called the “new radio”’¹³, and any other music platforms can represent a source for exploring new records which, inevitably, have an important impact on the music industry: ‘Online streaming services are often described as product discovery tools, which could potentially stimulate digital music sales and consumption’¹⁴.

The exploration of the music streaming platforms has impressively increased throughout the past decade: ‘According to IFPI’s year-end report for 2017, there are now 176 million global users of paid subscription services. Paid subscription streaming has grown 45.5% from the previous year, accounting for 38.4% of 2017’s total global revenue from recorded music’¹⁵. The main problem with the growth in popularity of such platforms was that the music industry was about to suffer a severe financial loss, but apparently the use of music streaming

¹¹ Gurpreet Bhoot, ‘Music Industry Sales: How streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music and TIDAL affect album sales’ (Senior Project, The Faculty of the Journalism Department California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2017), pp. 1-34 (p.5).

¹² Gurpreet Bhoot, ‘Music Industry Sales: How streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music and TIDAL affect album sales’ (Senior Project, The Faculty of the Journalism Department California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2017), pp. 1-34 (p.26).

¹³ Robert Prey, ‘Platform pop: disentangling Spotify’s intermediary role in the music industry’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 2020, pp. 1-19 (p.12) <
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1761859>>.

¹⁴ Luis Aguiar, ‘Let the music play? Free streaming and its effects on digital music consumption’, *Information Economics and Policy*, 41 (2017), pp. 1-14 (p. 1) <
[https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016762451630110X?fbclid=IwAR3HpOsDSQRt_t8fnONWLPwUlcbLxfP1gqIZ-BNIO_4KyyWwajKx\]twdgfU#fn0002](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016762451630110X?fbclid=IwAR3HpOsDSQRt_t8fnONWLPwUlcbLxfP1gqIZ-BNIO_4KyyWwajKx]twdgfU#fn0002) > [accessed 15 April 2021].

¹⁵ Jonathan Kiss, ‘How the Introduction of Streaming Has Changed the Financial Focal Points of the Music Industry’ (Senior Thesis, Liberty University, 2018), pp. 1-31 (p. 12).

services helped it recover from a rough crisis that lasted more than a decade: ‘Having declined for 14 continuous years from 2001 to 2014, the recorded music industry began to grow again, from US \$14.3 billion in the latter year to US \$20.2 billion in 2019. This growth was driven entirely by MSS, which brought in US \$1.9 billion in 2014, and US \$11.4 billion in 2019’¹⁶.

Another powerful tool when it comes to replacing the classic music suggestions via reviews is represented by the shuffle option which is provided by all streaming platforms. This method’s complexity consists of the never-ending new music discoveries that the platform can put at the users’ disposal. This strategy was a godsend for the evolution of the online music services as it gives the consumers the unusual sense of being in control of finding music, but at the same time they often find themselves at the mercy of a predetermined algorithm: ‘[...] random or ‘shuffle’ modes of listening provide an interesting midpoint between control and chance. Shuffle provides a more flexible approach to musical engagement, and is a very popular listening strategy, as part of the new flexibility that technology affords’¹⁷. This way, the users are appealed by the fact that they receive new music by just clicking a simple button. Although it seems like the shuffle option represents a random process of delivering music, the mechanism behind depends on the consumers’ music preferences resulting in what we identify as suggestions.

Throughout the past decade, social media played a major role in the worldwide music streaming. While ‘Claire BeDell (2013) of Sproutsocial, a social media monitoring application, points out that “the traditional music business model used to depend on record sales — and record sales alone”’¹⁸, now the

¹⁶ David Hesmondhalgh, ‘Is music streaming bad for musicians? Problems of evidence and argument’, *New Media & Society*, 2020, pp. 1-23 (p. 3)
<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444820953541>>.

¹⁷ Katie Rose M. Sanfilippo, Neta Spiro, Miguel Molina-Solana, Alexandra Lamont, ‘Do the shuffle: Exploring reasons for music listening through shuffled play’, 2020, pp. 1-21 (p.3)
<<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0228457>>.

¹⁸ Rachel Zucker, ‘The Effects of Social Media on Music Sharing’ (Senior Thesis, Dominican University of California, 2016), pp. 1-11 (p.4).

possibilities of consuming music are virtually infinite. From their forerunner Myspace, social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram have become a supportive environment for sharing and discovering music. These platforms represent substantial sources for discussing about artists and sharing new music, implicitly being an essential tool for augmenting musicians' fanbase: 'Popular micro-blogging service Twitter has become an outlet for talking about music. According to Brandwatch's 2013 Twitter Landscape Report, music is the third-most talked about conversation topic on Twitter'¹⁹.

The YouTube's inception significantly changed the fortunes of the music industry. This platform consists of miscellaneous kinds of videos from makeup tutorials to concerts and vlogs about how to train your dog. This phenomenal variety of videos is also encountered when it comes to music streaming on YouTube. Both artists and people passionate about music have free access to create a profile for posting videos and nowadays there are millions of accounts for analyzing and recommending music. YouTube gave birth to today's online reviewers who unlike the old-school professional review writers are mostly amateurs. Even so, their community has been growing ever since and now they represent a valuable source for coming upon new music.

Anthony Fantano is a vivid example of what astonishing opportunities YouTube can give to people willing to share their points of view. With his diligent style, humorous approach and devotion to reflect today's music through his own perception, he has succeeded in creating a prodigious community and earning people's reliability when reviewing albums and songs: '[...] he was meticulous about crafting his channel, studying competitors, including websites that still relied on the written word, and keeping his approach simple, intimate and

¹⁹ Rachel Zucker, 'The Effects of Social Media on Music Sharing' (Senior Thesis, Dominican University of California, 2016), pp. 1-11 (p.6).

communal'²⁰. He has now become a renowned reviewer whose channel *The Needle Drop* is considered a trustworthy resource for music related content.

The discrepancy between popular music magazines and the online platforms is conspicuous and it is fiddly to say which one is more beneficial to the audience. Nevertheless, throughout history the relationship between the music industry and the consumers has been consolidated and not wrecked by the Internet connection. Even though the online realm is filled with both relevant and futile opinions and information, it has facilitated the access to music of any kind and made the 'whole package' more attractive through visual and audio exposure: 'Explained Adams: "The web's ability to throw in a video or something with a play button is, for most people, a billion times better than a verbose description involving seemingly irrelevant metaphors"'²¹. This way, the likelihood in 2021 of opting for digital media consumption is detrimental to preserving the legacy of the classic music publications, although both ways of content dissemination are nothing but forms of delivering information and insights into the same musical landscape.

From 'The UK press has enjoyed a long, successful and generally stable history' to '[...] streaming, accompanied by live music sales, may actually be the driving forces behind the new survival and growth of the music industry'²², the journey of popular music press' development has faced decisive changes, not only regarding its symbolic perception, but also its material value: 'vinyl to digital and streaming'²³. Despite all this technological commotion, ad rem reviews will

²⁰ Joe Coscarelli, 'The Only Music Critic Who Matters (if You're Under 25)', *The New York Times* < https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/arts/music/anthony-fantano-the-needle-drop.html?fbclid=IwAR27BzI6b_L6ceVbkPnR5pbpmvYCZeTb1tZJNd-GzpOxFjIKv8cDVWUAGpI> [accessed 29 April 2021].

²¹ Simon Warner, 'Chapter 25: In Print and On Screen: The Changing Character of Popular Music Journalism', in *The SAGE Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. by Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (London: SAGE Publication Inc., 2015), pp. 439-455 (p. 452).

²² Benjamin Fly, 'How Does Music Consumption Impact the Music Industry and Benefit Artists?' (Senior Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2016), pp. 1-42 (p. 40).

²³ Benjamin Fly, 'How Does Music Consumption Impact the Music Industry and Benefit Artists?' (Senior Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2016), pp. 1-42 (p. 38).

never get old and among infinite fluid opinions that define the online music sources, a professional point of view can save the music industry from a regrettable depreciation.

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