More: Robert Christgau and the Invention of Rock Criticism

by

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PREFACE

Just because Robert Christgau has bequeathed one of the richest journalistic oeuvres of the last century—two book collections of essays; countless profiles, think pieces, lists, and polemics; and almost 14,000 capsule album reviews, mostly for the *Village Voice*—does not mean he is above making outlandish pronouncements. And thank goodness. In June 2006, Christgau called Sonic Youth "the best band in the universe."^{1†} I happen to agree, but that's beside the point. When one has written as much or endured as long in criticism as Christgau has, one *should* nominate a best

_____ in the universe. And such hyperbole is essential to the spirit of rock criticism, the literary genre Christgau co-invented in the late 1960s. Whereas many of Christgau's early contemporaries, such as Greil Marcus and Jim Miller, have drifted toward academia and book-length writing, Christgau continues to pump out concise, insightful reviews for magazines and websites, in addition to blogging on press issues for the National Arts Journalism Program. A close look at his inspiring career helps telescope 40 years of changes in rock criticism, in journalism and publishing, and in pop music itself.

Inspired by Top 40 radio and the infectious cultural optimism of the '60s, Christgau saw rock criticism as a possible way to help bring about a grand democratic resolution to America's cultural tensions. But he realized very early in his career that

¹ Robert Christgau, "Rather Exhilarating: The Best Band in the Universe Do Their Brecht Thing With Hooks," *Village Voice*, June 13, 2006, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/sonic-06.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

[†] Note: weblinks to articles herein given only with article's first footnote in each chapter

this was a crazy wish. It was only as a result of an incredibly special set of coincidences that Christgau and a generation of pop culture enthusiasts were able to glimpse a utopia in which the divisions between high and low, intelligence and pleasure, art and commerce no longer mattered. Nevertheless, Christgau kept writing criticism even after he realized that maybe the grand democratic resolution would never happen. He's a pragmatist and believes pessimism helps nobody. By knuckling down and applying a craftsman's determination to the obsessive enterprise of reviewing new music, he made a point about the public role of the intellectual: Even though utopias may be chimeras, it's important to strive for them anyway. The grand democratic resolution only exists insofar as people are willing to envision it and fight for it. The key is to be smart and balanced: strong principled but self-undermining, well read but pleasure-oriented, tough but fair. His Consumer Guide, a monthly collection of 125-or-so-word album reviews that has served as Christgau's primary outlet for nearly 40 years, embodies this approach.

"What I'm most pleased about," Christgau said in 2001, "is that I'm a professional writer and I get to say something that closely approximates what I might actually want to say."² Aside from underscoring the constraints placed on professional critics, the quote illustrates what I like so much about Christgau. He values opinions above pretty much anything else. And that's why his readers take his opinions so seriously. If one of my friends told me Moby's *Play* or the compilation *ESPN Presents Slam Jams, Vol. 1* was a great record, I'd probably laugh. But the

² Barbara O'Dair, "A Conversation With Robert Christgau," *Salon*, May 9, 2001, <u>http://archive.salon.com/ent/music/int/2001/05/09/xgau/</u>, p. 6, accessed Apr. 12, 2008.

same judgment from Christgau would send me rushing to the internet, because I can be sure he's situated those records in the broadest possible frame of reference and cares deeply that I hear what they have to say. He also helps his case immensely with unique prose: dauntingly erudite but inspiringly direct but mercifully funny. By comparison, even the best contemporary rock critics can sound sullen and apathetic.

In the late '60s and early '70s, Christgau belonged to a cohort of writers that shared a common belief in the cultural possibilities of rock music. It seemed for a while that rock would serve as the locus of a convivial, democratic community that simultaneously produced serious, enduring works of art and generated a popular audience. This theoretical community manifested most substantially at the 1967 Monterey International Pop Festival, a three-day outdoor rock concert that marked the exuberant high point of the Summer of Love. Christgau covered the event for *Esquire*, the matrix of New Journalism. But by the time of Woodstock just two years later, rock's social status had slipped as the genre showed signs of fragmentation and self-indulgence. Rock criticism had yet to take off, but from then on it would be difficult to make a case for rock's world-changing significance. Nevertheless, the first generation of rock critics enjoyed a ten-year-plus stretch in which their work, ideas, and personae were greatly valued within mainstream journalism.

As editors began to reclaim the high-priced journalistic real estate rock music had become too obscure and specialized to occupy, many of these critics found other fields. Only the best and most passionate carried on through the '80s, and many of these hedged their bets by accepting jobs within the music industry or by moving into teaching. But neither vocation ever fully satisfied Christgau, who unlike many of his

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contemporaries saw rock criticism as a place to do vanguard work in journalism. Even Greil Marcus, Christgau's only living rockcrit rival for literary esteem, initially saw rock criticism simply as a way to participate in rock 'n' roll culture. "There had to be some way for someone who wasn't a musician to take part," he says, "and this was my way."³ For all his genuine passion for the subject, meanwhile, Christgau always saw rock criticism as instrumental to his ambitious plan to have a career as cutting-edge literary journalist. He succeeded, but instead of being talked about in the same breath as Tom Wolfe or Gay Talese, which he initially imagined he one day would be, he's singular—the inventor of rock criticism as we now know it.

Christgau is nowhere near as gonzo as Richard Meltzer, arguably less of an essayist than Lester Bangs, and claims to posses a narrower range of knowledge than colleagues like Jon Pareles and Chuck Eddy. But I'd argue that no rock critic has taken the form farther than Christgau. Others have had moments of blinding brilliance; some have even put together decorated, multiple-decade careers. But Christgau outshines everyone. He's the genre's most astute theorist, its biggest single popularizer, and one of the best journalistic stylists of the 20th century.

I originally planned to carry my study through to the present, but as my research progressed it became obvious that I would never be able to adequately address Christgau's entire career within the length constraints of this thesis. I would have had to shortchange rap, and that's something enough people have done already. So this story leaves off in the mid-'80s, in the middle of a transitional moment that marks the

³ Greil Marcus, email message to author, Mar. 12, 2008.

end of rock's period as American's dominant popular music and the beginning of rap's rush to take its place. Four years into the Reagan presidency, Christgau faced a situation few could have imagined in the euphoria of 1967: Far from overcoming the institutional boundaries of art, rock music had reproduced those very boundaries in its own backyard. Pop lovers feuded with so-called rockists over the importance of authenticity, while the American independent label system inherited the tradition of the Great Rock Album. Singles became the recording industry's new revenue base, but contemporary hit radio (CHR) could do nothing to restore the cultural consensus pop music had last enjoyed in the mid-'60s. Many veteran rock critics took this as their cue to leave, but not Christgau. Although he stepped down as the Voice's music editor in 1984, he continued to write as much as ever. Pazz & Jop, the year-end critics survey Christgau had overseen since 1971, sent out more ballots every year; the 2005 poll, Christgau's last at the *Voice*, canvassed 795 critics. But while the *Voice* maintained, rock critics in the '80s saw the beginning of a decline in wages and opportunities that continues to this day.

It's a terrible time to be a rock critic. While the internet has opened up new outlets, it has so far done nothing to reverse twenty years of diminishing wages, respect, and column inches. Many of the best rock critics today are charitable hobbyists who freelance in their spare time. Faced with such challenges, one can draw inspiration from Robert Christgau. For an improbably long stretch of time, he has combined craftsman's determination and a smart, self-undermining utopianism in an effort to bring listeners to a closer relationship with the music they like. Insofar as without people like him we might forget why we produce and consume art to begin

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with, he has succeeded.

Today's web-based purveyors of 500-word song reviews would do well to buy one of Christgau's decennial collections of Consumer Guide columns and open to a random page. They might learn that it's quite possible to convey an album's social context, stylistic flavor, and artistic value in a 125-word capsule. All it takes is an open mind, a servile devotion to the subject, and an investment in your own opinions. "I figure a rock critic ought to have three qualities," Christgau wrote in 1971. "Interest, and arrogance, and writing ability."⁴ After 30-plus years of histories, biographies, journalism, and scholarship, today's pop music critic must posses a breadth of knowledge that would have been unattainable in the early days of the field. But pop music criticism still draws energy from the naivety and enthusiasm of uncredentialed upstarts. "There's no reason," Christgau says, "why someone with those three qualities can't come on the scene and knock your socks off."⁵ Despite the inevitable professionalization of the rock press, the genre continues to occupy a unique role in American arts journalism. "Rock criticism is unusual," Simon Frith says, "because rock criticism is older than rock academicism."⁶ Unlike in other fields, journalistic rock critics have more scholarly authority than their academic counterparts. And Robert Christgau is the greatest authority of them all.

Especially as the recording industry negotiates the greatest uncertainty and vulnerability it has known in decades, it's important that writers and publications resist the commodity fetishism that has been the standard mode of pop music

⁴ Christgau, "What Does It All Mean?" *Village Voice*, Feb. 17, 1972, <u>http://robertchristgau.com/xg/pnj/pj71.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008.

⁵ Christgau, telephone interview with author, Nov. 1, 2007.

⁶ Simon Frith, telephone interview with author, Mar. 20, 2008.

criticism since the mid-'80s. Recorded music won't be a viable commodity much longer. Like computer virus designers, music piraters will continue to find new ways to outmaneuver watchdogs, and if fans won't be able to "illegally" download every album they want, they'll be able to pilfer widely enough to make recorded music a loser's game. Going forward, record companies will redraw contracts to claim a bigger stake of alternative revenue streams such as concert tickets, merchandise, and—in the case of enterprising megastars like Jay-Z—clothing lines and nightclubs and publishing companies. It's unclear what effect this will have on music itself, but I'm not convinced of a downturn in quality in any of the genres I pay attention to. Experienced critics who remember better than I do might beg to differ, but the past three years have been an embarrassment of riches for independent rock, a compelling if economically deflationary period for rap, and a time of exuberant experimentation and expanding audiences for both dance music and metal. And while I'm not qualified to make any grand generalization on country music, it seems one can no longer take it for granted that most rock critics carry a categorical hatred for the genre.

Theoretically this is good news for critics, who increasingly will be looked to for leisure time guidance. "Unless you've got completely no life at all," Simon Frith says, "and spend all your time browsing around on the web listening to things, you still need what you've always needed: someone you trust to guide you in the limited time you've got."⁷ But magazines and websites that treat their readership's leisure time as a commodity like any other will miss an opportunity to combat the fervent

⁷ Ibid.

anti-intellectualism that has accompanied the consolidation of the media. Websites like *Pitchfork Media* (full disclosure: my former employer) have done a good job delivering exciting new sounds, but not of making a convincing case for why readers should care about them for more than 15 minutes. The internet has revolutionized music by weakening the corporate mechanisms that have typically stood between artists and listeners. But it has enabled an oversaturation of content that threatens to further erode the small remaining patch of common ground through which people relate to each other about music. Websites can either use this increased capacity to overwhelm readers, fostering an anxiety over "missing something" and thereby accelerating the rate of consumption. Or they can act as conduit, bringing good music to the broadest possible exposure.

I believe there's enough good music right now that if a website dedicated itself to presenting a diverse but manageably sized selection of the best stuff, framed by concise, well-edited, insightful writing, who knows? Maybe we could start talking about a musical monoculture again. At the very least my dream site would make good reading. I can't imagine a better format for such a site than Robert Christgau's Consumer Guide. It's true that in 40-plus years of writing, Christgau has so far been unable to bring about a new period of cultural consensus built around pop music. But he has produced an almost unimaginable amount of stellar arts criticism, and whether or not young critics follow his inspiring example, the writing will always be there.

CHAPTER 1

In the late 1960s, rock 'n' roll was ripe for writing. A decade after Elvis Presley scandalized the institution of respectable American entertainment, the genre had yet to show signs of slowing down. Musicians were beginning to explore new possibilities with the rock form, helping to foster the belief that pop music could be serious art. In 1967, at the height of mainstream America's infatuation with the counterculture, Robert Christgau began writing rock criticism. With no existing tradition against which to measure what he was doing, Christgau ventured into completely uncharted territory. He sought a form of writing that could address rock music seriously without dulling its vital edge. Though he had no plans to become a career rock journalist, Christgau surprised himself: His early efforts helped kick off a literary renaissance in popular arts criticism.

Christgau locates rock 'n' roll's cultural realization in 1955, about four years after Top 40 radio format arrived.⁸ Top 40 applied a logic of oversaturation to the promotion of music. By ensuring listeners would hear the same selection of popular songs no matter what time of day they tuned in, the format paved the way for rock music to become mass culture. In the summer of '55, Chuck Berry and Little Richard were household names among whites, and Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" was the most popular song in the country. Rock 'n' roll could be heard, seen, and felt by

⁸ Robert Christgau, "A History of Rock Criticism," *Reporting the Arts II: New Coverage of Arts and Culture in America*, ed. Andras Szanto, Daniel S. Levy, and Andrew Tyndall, (New York: National Arts Journalism Program, 2003), p. 140.

anyone interested.9

But the music was slow to receive recognition in the mainstream print media. If the appearance of professional critics in daily newspapers can be see to mark the arrival of a cultural medium in the public consciousness, rock 'n' roll remained an obscurity longer than it had any right to. By 1958, when the trade magazine Billboard inaugurated its Hot 100 popularity chart with teen idol Ricky Nelson's "Poor Little Fool" as the first number one hit, rock 'n' roll had become rock and roll, and it was known in virtually every radio-owning home in America. Not until 1964, however, when Jane Scott started a column in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, could one read a rock critic in a daily paper.¹⁰ And Scott was an early pioneer, one of only a handful of critics nationwide who wrote a pop music column in a newspaper before 1970. Television, on the other hand, was much quicker to carve out a journalistic space for itself. By the early 1950s, relatively early in the medium's path from novel technology to domestic anchor, television critics occupied desks at dailies throughout the country.¹¹ In New York, critic Jack Gould sacrificed Elvis Presley to his mission to foster respectable, socially conscious television, decrying the singer's appearance on the Milton Berle show. But in 1956 no rock critic existed to dispute Gould's claim that Presley had "no discernible signing ability."¹²

Is this surprising? On the one hand, rock and roll was an exciting investment.

⁹ See Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jack Gould quoted in Larry Rohter and Tom Zito, "Rock Idol Elvis Presley Dies at 42," *Washington Post*, August 17, 1977, <u>http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/elvis/epobit.htm</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

It lent itself to dancing, and as such it was a potential hit with the ripe youth market. This at a time when expanding consumer industries and the postwar baby boom made teenagers the object of relentless marketing. Rock historian Charlie Gillett contends that the emergence of rock and roll was intimately bound up with the emergence of the "adolescent" market, a development warmly welcomed by the culture industry.¹³

On the other hand, rock 'n' roll was rebellious. And dancing to the antiauthoritarian, sexual, racially integrated music was even worse. Since "adolescence" was a sociological fabrication presupposing the indiscretion and vulnerability of teenagers, any unmediated adolescent cultural phenomenon caused panic among parents and officials. Newspapers and magazines, already edgy from the prying of HUAC, could ill afford to risk scandal by covering a morally questionable culture—even if Hollywood was riding movies like *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* directly into the pockets of the parvenu teen demographic.

Any magazine looking to ingratiate itself with a young audience would have had to address rock and roll: It was the music that gave voice to the ideas, attitudes, and practices of so-called nonconformity (columnist Jean Shepherd's favorite term), and it was extraordinarily popular. But journalism, like the record industry, hoped rock and roll would prove a flash-in-the-pan novelty.¹⁴ And if the record industry hesitated to throw resources behind rock and roll singers, how could mainstream journalism, which stood to gain even less from the situation, be expected to do so? Not even the *Village Voice*, the organ of New York bohemianism from 1955 onward,

¹³ Gillet, The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll, p. 15

¹⁴ See ibid.

gamed up to rock music. "Their music section was just horrendous," Christgau says.¹⁵ Until the mid-'70s, most of the music writing published in the *Voice* (with the exception of Richard Goldstein's short-lived "Pop Eye" column) was "slack, corny, and anonymous."¹⁶

The extremely slow pace at which American publications picked up rock coverage gave critics an opportunity to experiment with the form in ways they would not have been able to had the genre been professionalized more efficiently. Compared with the '50s, the 1960s were a liberal time for journalism, and an exuberant era for magazines. As the booming magazine industry took advantage of the changing social mores and cultural fads of the era, profits streamed in from a surging advertising industry.¹⁷ Seeking to capitalize on the market potential of nonconformity and on the public's desire for cultural gatekeepers, publications like *Esquire* opened their doors to young, ambitious reporters who were expected to provide a fresh take on new lifestyle trends. Conveniently enough, a young crop of talented freelancers, weaned on the writing of Truman Capote and A.J. Leibling, was hunting for venues in which to experiment with form and develop the craft of reporting. The most skilled of these writers—such as Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer—were granted significant freedom in terms of content and style. Called upon to mediate forbidding subcultural

¹⁵ Christgau, telephone interview with author, Dec. 1, 2007

¹⁶ Christgau, "Can't Stop the Music: The 'Voice' Invents Rock Criticism," *Village Voice* (Oct. 18, 2005),

http://www.villagevoice.com/specials/0543,50thexgau,69321,31.html, accessed Apr. 12, 2008.

¹⁷ See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997)

phenomena for a wide readership, they came to wield tremendous influence.¹⁸

As the house organ of these new journalists, *Esquire* was the most exciting venue of the era's magazine revolution. Its success stemmed from the perceptiveness with which it anticipated the upheaval of the '60s. *Esquire* "dwelled in the conflict between the new world that was rushing in and the old ways that were shuffling out," Frank DiGiacomo explains.¹⁹ In the '60s, magazines went to press three to four months before actually hitting newsstands. Consequently, news did not dictate a publication's content like it does today. Foresight was critical, and the biggest winners in the '60s magazine game were those who could anticipate trends by six months or more. If Esquire editor-in-chief Harold Hayes was not a clairvoyant, he at least knew that to win, he needed to surround himself with people who were, and he needed to give them their head. Collecting a motley stable of writers ranging from Philip Roth to Terry Southern, Hayes's magazine would come to represent the knifeedge of popular cultural criticism. The magazine used the political and racial upheaval of the '60s to its advantage. When the prizefighter Sunny Liston, who was renowned for his aggressive personality, appeared on the cover of *Esquire*'s 1963 Christmas issue scowling under a Santa hat, advertisers recoiled in horror, and the resulting pullouts cost the magazine an estimated \$750,000.²⁰ But fillips like the Liston cover built *Esquire* a reputation as a cultural cattle prod.

Eventually, Hayes decided rock coverage was obligatory if *Esquire* was to

¹⁸ See Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006)

¹⁹ Frank DiGiacomo, "The *Esquire* Decade," Vanity Fair, Jan. 2001, http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/esquire200701, accessed Apr. 12, 2008. ²⁰ Ibid.

continue offering a comprehensive image of the zeitgeist. In 1967 he let Robert Christgau take over the magazine's dormant "Secular Music" column.

Christgau loved Norman Mailer. An ardent fan of the *Village Voice* from its inception in 1955, Christgau embraced Mailer's vision of a new, populist bohemianism. And although he reserved skepticism for the hippies who fetishized Mailer's idea of the hipster as a sort of subterranean cultural fugitive,²¹ Christgau partook of the widespread '60s suspicion of liberal elite institutions, a group that included his alma mater Dartmouth. "I was very appreciative of the fact that I managed to get a good education at an Ivy League school," he says. "I don't think I ever really lost that. But that doesn't mean I wasn't critical. That doesn't mean I didn't write left wing letters to the alumni magazine."²²

Christgau was raised a devout Christian in Queens, New York. His father, a fireman, "worked like a dog," but money troubles never crippled the pious family.²³ "We grew up in an expanding economy. Our parents were forever telling us they were about to go broke but instead they were able to afford a new washing machine."²⁴ The style and attitude of rock and roll did not come naturally to Christgau, but he learned through listening to the radio. Tuning in late at night to top-of-the-dial stations like WOV, Christgau heard out-of-town R&B tracks like the

²¹ See Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Advertisements For Myself*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), pp. 337-359

²² Christgau, telephone interview with author, Dec. 1, 2007.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Gladiolas' "Little Diamond."²⁵ He didn't begin buying rock and roll albums until 1965, when he was 20 years old, but in the early '60s one didn't need to buy albums. "I was deeply into pop. The very notion that this machine would deliver delectable goodies to my ear. That I didn't have to do any work at all."²⁶

Christgau claims to have been a merely average student, but as a result of an IQ test he was skipped a grade and transferred to a predominantly Jewish junior high school in Corona, Queens. His parents agonized over whether he could handle the long commute to school, but his new classmates proved the biggest adjustment. "What I really had to handle were the Jewish kids, who changed my life. For the next ten years of my life all of my friends were Jewish. The trip? Big deal."²⁷ A self-described weirdo, Christgau didn't mind dwelling on the social periphery. "T've gone through my life with a lot of natural confidence."²⁸ The hip kids began inviting him to parties, but Christgau couldn't dance. "It sort of didn't bother me."²⁹

After receiving the best board scores in his class, Christgau enrolled at Dartmouth. He was sixteen. But in spite of his age and class background, transitioning from working-class Queens to a privileged Ivy League campus didn't phase Christgau. Scholarships covered most of his \$1,400 tuition. "We needed that money badly."³⁰ But unless one majored in sociology, Christgau explains, class was not an important psychological category in '50s America. "Was I aware that there were frat boys and was I aware that some of those kids had been to private school and

- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

some of them had a lot of money? Yes, I was aware of all those things. Did it make me feel like I had something to prove or I was inferior or different? I honestly never thought about it."³¹

At Dartmouth, Christgau's music consumption habits changed significantly, mostly due to his geographic isolation. He began listening to folk music, then, repelled by Joan Baez, switched to jazz. But each summer back in New York he would rediscover his enthusiasm for R&B and Top 40 radio. One summer Christgau worked at a park near his house in Queens, where he was charged with keeping the local delinquents in line. "I was barely older than they were. That was when I started to curse, not at Dartmouth. I started saying fuck all the time just so I could fit in with them."³² When he turned eighteen, Christgau began hanging out in jazz clubs.

Studying English at Dartmouth, Christgau came to distrust the "official college love of literature."³³ If a key aspect of Christgau's education was learning to love literature, equally important was his learning *not* to love it. "The New Criticism was, as I said in my final paper, another religion."³⁴ The metaphor reflects Christgau's earlier renunciation of his boyhood Christianity. By his senior year of college, Christgau had become a militant atheist. While many late '60s counterculturalists, including Christgau's *Esquire*-period girlfriend and former junior high classmate Ellen Willis, dabbled in mysticism, Christgau "already knew about religion."³⁵

- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.

In terms of politics and taste, Christgau identified with the counterculture but from a distance. "I've always been a sympathizer who worked from the outside, and I had a somewhat more practical and down-to-earth analysis."³⁶ It wasn't until he was in his fifties that Christgau began thinking of himself as a relative radical. But he has always tended to find common causes with people whose stances are farther left than his.

Although deeply critical of the institution, Christgau still valued his Ivy League education. Christgau's years at Dartmouth left him with a devotion to aesthetic quality that would energize his work even at its most irreverent and mocking. His senior year at Dartmouth, Christgau was booted from the honors program in English for bungling a thesis on Norman Mailer and Ernest Hemingway. "I got a little arrogant."³⁷ While Christgau questioned and challenged the idea of a literary canon, he also recognized its function. "The notion that a canon can be limiting, and is almost always a vehicle for concealed economic and political prejudice, racial prejudice, as it is, doesn't mean *Madame Bovary* isn't a great book."³⁸ If anything, Christgau's disillusionment with his literary education only helped him arrive at an idea of the kind of writer he wished to become. He was intrigued by new developments in fiction and journalism and clearly saw himself capable of becoming a great writer.

After leaving Dartmouth, Christgau set off to hitchhike across the country. "I was interested in bohemians, I knew about the Beat Generation," he says. "I thought

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

about all those things. I identified with them. I wanted to ride box cars."³⁹ The plan was to write fiction, but after landing in California Christgau struggled getting his career off the ground:

I was in Berkeley in 1964 myself, age 22, along with my typewriter, a 1950 Plymouth, a tiny transistor radio, and many devotees of the acoustic guitar. The typewriter and the folk freaks were my enemies, the radio and the car—equipped with a radio of its, of course—my allies, and as the evening progressed more quickly than my novel. I would often take long walks with the radio or drive down to Oakland to play the pinball machines and listen to the jukebox. As it had during high school in the '50s and again in the year following my graduation from college in 1962, rock and roll provided spiritual sustenance.⁴⁰

Christgau spent periods of weeks and months in California from 1964 through 1969, mostly renting or crashing with friends. Back on the East Coast during the majority of these years, he decided to try his hand at journalism. First working the police beat at the Newark *Star-Ledger* then as a copy boy at *New York* (while Clay Felker's hip startup was still the Sunday-magazine supplement of the *New York Herald Tribune*), Christgau demonstrated modest potential as a reporter. His *New York* report on the freak diet-related death of a New Jersey woman won wide acclaim, earning him a call from *Esquire*.⁴¹ While Christgau disliked the schmoozing and hanging out involved in being a good reporter, a career as a writer for upmarket national magazines seemed within reach. He took to the scene with aggressive

⁴⁰ Christgau, "Gap Again," Village Voice, Mar. 3, 1969,

³⁹ Ibid.

http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/gap-69.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008. ⁴¹ Barbara O'Dair, "A Conversation With Robert Christgau," *Salon* (May 9, 2001), http://archive.salon.com/ent/music/int/2001/05/09/xgau/, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

ambition and a keen eye for the ways in which journalism was rapidly developing. But he did not want to be a critic, even though his friends and colleagues told him he'd make a good one.⁴²

As with so many of the arty baby boomers he would later write about, the unusual social circumstances of the 1960s allowed Christgau to follow his muse. "I led a life most Americans would describe as bohemian—unconventional in appearance, irregular in employment, postliberal in politics, peripatetic, and arty."⁴³ The era's booming economy suited his inclinations. At "the high watermark of American prosperity," one did not have to be rich to sustain a transient existence.⁴⁴ "Freelance writer" could describe a career, rather than just a vocation or a hobby. And so Christgau was able to split his early postgrad years between coasts, not feeling a tremendous rush to build a routinized life. Although his experiences in California were by no means an unqualified success, Christgau's salad years spent writing, listening, and pinball-playing helped him develop a keen eye for social analysis and satire. California left Christgau with a suspicion of the people he would eventually refer to ambivalently as "the love crowd," but it also gave him a more nuanced overview of the counterculture.

The coasts differed greatly in their understandings of the counterculture. "New York," the critic Simon Frith has written, "had its own musical and commercial traditions and its own bohemians who were, on the whole more cynical, more

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Christgau, "A Counter in Search of a Culture," *Any Old Way You Choose It*, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁴⁴ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 6

political, more aggressive (and more conscious of black culture) than anyone in California.⁴⁵ Both intellectually and stylistically, Christgau found himself more at home in the Northeast. It was his turf. By the late '60s he had installed himself on the Lower East Side. At the time, Ellen Willis was writing for the *New Yorker* as the magazine's first pop music critic.

Esquire expected Christgau to write rock criticism, but at first he wasn't sure he had found his métier. He hoped to take up the artful reportage he admired in Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe. Christgau claims to not have been intimidated in his new work quarters. "It was what I envisioned for myself," he says.⁴⁶ Judging by how well his early writing captures (without formulaically reproducing) *Esquire*'s aggressive, irreverent, somewhat supercilious house style, it seems likely Christgau studied the magazine in anticipation of doing more than just writing about music.

Christgau's *Esquire* columns are interesting examples of early rock journalism. They're noticeably defensive, but humorously ironic. Despite occasional stiltedness resulting from his pained efforts to find an unexpected angle, Christgau performed confidently in his earliest pieces. His voice is clear, erudite, and knowledgeable. By way of an introduction in his first column, Christgau provokingly called attention to rock's exceedingly ungenteel nature. "I ought to warn you that I am one of the barbarians," he wrote.⁴⁷ He then directed his gaze backward, examining greatest hits compilations of three artists from the '50s. His graceful writing involved a strange mixture of praise and condescension:

⁴⁵ Simon Frith, "1967: The Year It All Came Together," *The History of Rock* (1981), <u>http://www.rocksbackpages.com</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008.

⁴⁶ Christgau, telephone interview with author, Dec. 1, 2008

⁴⁷ Christgau, "Secular Music: June 1967," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 35.

Out of curiosity and nostalgia, I have been listening to greatest hits albums by three of the best performers of the fifties: Chuck Berry, the Coasters, and Little Richard. All are black, a good indication of what I remember most fondly from the period. I wondered how they would sound now, after my ear had become accustomed to all those intelligent lyrics and complicated arrangements. They sound just fine.⁴⁸

Christgau's colloquialism highlighted one of the central tensions of the music of the late '60s. Many white rock musicians during this period tried to distinguish themselves from their ostensibly simpler, more organic black predecessors by honing the craft elements of rock 'n' roll—lyrics, instrumentation, and arrangement. But at the same time, the British Invasion appropriated the blues as the authentic origin of the genre. These complementary strains may have differed on the surface, but they shared a commitment to authenticity and a suspicion of popular entertainment. Christgau's column participated in this dynamic by using greatest hits albums to imply a genealogy of good, authentic music. Without necessarily endorsing the institution of greatest hits albums, he acknowledged such albums' role in canon building and thus presented his own credentials for having a role in the development of rock culture. But unlike many of his contemporaries, Christgau emphasized rock's pop side. In fact, he thought its commercial appeal was intrinsic to its aesthetic value.

In Christgau's early columns, one detects soft notes of the ironic, proudly opinionated voice that would come to drive his writing. But at *Esquire* Christgau's personality was undercut somewhat by a more prominent quest for gravitas. Rather than trying to recreate the aesthetic experience of Chuck Berry's songs, for instance,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36

Christgau assumed the audience's familiarity with the material and wrote from a historical vantage point. "Even the more obviously commercial teen things," he wrote, specifying neither which songs he meant nor what a "teen thing" sounds like, "are, at worst, excellent musically and, at best, successful evocations of a world [Berry] could have known only from a distance."⁴⁹

Christgau's liberal employment of the first person voice during this period is also telling. In the illuminating introduction to his 1998 collection of essays *Grown Up All Wrong*, Christgau compared the methods of early rock criticism with those of *Esquire*-style New Journalism:

That the innovations of the rock and alternative press were so much looser was partly pie-eyed and partly bottom-line. Intensive Wolfe/Talese-style reporting requires rare talent and long labor, commodities that generally cost money, whereas confessional narrative, wild verbiage, polemical disputation, lofty thoughts, and the editorial 'I' come cheap. Yet while the strictures against these journalistic no-no's are well-taken, not one is altogether barren as a literary method, and the sixties were ripe for all of them.⁵⁰

At *Esquire*, Christgau relied on the editorial "I" as the newel of his tone: "I remember"; "I wonder"; "I have been." But while his "I" served a kind of urbane understatement that lent itself ideally to '60s *Esquire*, it also compensated for certain lacks in Christgau's early writing and in early rock criticism in general. "Gradually I accrued what I knew I didn't have to begin with, which is one reason I used the first

⁴⁹ Ibid., 37

⁵⁰ Christgau, "My Favorite Waste of Time," *Grown Up All Wrong*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 5.

person, which is authority. And knowledge.⁵¹ Few critics at the time possessed enough of either, however, to call Christgau's bluff. He could get away with writing about the artists and issues that mattered most to him.

The first name to appear in "Secular Music" is Chuck Berry—the same Chuck Berry who graces the covers of both of Christgau's published collections of essays. A light-skinned black who was among the first to capitalize artistically on the potential of Top 40 radio, Berry prefigured the racial and commercial tensions in the rock of the '60s. "If importance in popular music were measured in terms of imaginativeness, creativeness, wit, the ability to translate a variety of experiences and feelings into musical form, and long-term influence," historian Charlie Gillett wrote in his early rock history Sound of the City, "Chuck Berry would be described as the major figure of rock 'n' roll."⁵² Since his influence clearly extended over the mainstream rock artists of the mid-'60s, including the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Rolling Stones, Berry gave Christgau a means for establishing a genealogy. "What I used to like and what I like now are, almost, two different things," he admitted.⁵³ "The original pastiche" of r&b and country-western—"ersatz, repetitious, sometimes imbecilic"-had gradually become more complex thanks to the addition of orchestration, gimmicks, and developments in technology.⁵⁴ This process of gentrification absolutely exploded with the arrival of the Beatles, setting the precedent for notions of rock 'n' roll as a "serious" form. "Rock and roll has

⁵¹ Christgau, telephone interview with author, Dec. 1, 2008

⁵² Gillett, Sound of the City, p. 80.

⁵³ Christgau, "Secular Music: June 1967," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 35.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

exfoliated so luxuriously that it is frequently unrecognizable," Christgau declared.⁵⁵ But Berry revealed a larger continuity that contained the divide in Christgau's tastes in popular music.

Christgau managed to gloss this complicated social history in five paragraphs of brisk *Esquire*-speak. Despite a few moments of awkwardness, the piece is entertaining and functional. But in its mix of nostalgia and condescending praise, Christgau's prose embodied the ambivalence surrounding late '60s rock music: was it serious art or imbecilic entertainment? Christgau's quest to resolve this ambivalence, and, in the process, develop an authoritative critical persona, would define his career at *Esquire*.

Although some consider Christgau's *Esquire*-period writing among his greatest work, it's clear he quickly outgrew the magazine's conventions and restraints. Christgau sought a method of writing that could address rock and roll seriously without spoiling it. In theory, *Esquire*'s style-is-substance approach lent itself to such a mission. But Christgau struggled to find a niche. His best shot to prove himself as fleet-footed reporter came when *Esquire* tagged him to interview Dean Martin. On arrival in Los Angeles, Christgau cruised to the set of Martin's new movie in a Warner Brothers limo—only to discover that the King of Cool, an infamous recluse, did not wish to speak with him. "I had done very little research on Dean Martin," Christgau remembers. "I thought I was just going to hang out with him and write down what he

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36

said.⁵⁶ Perhaps he imagined producing something similar to "Frank Sinatra's Has a Cold," Gay Talese's famous 1966 profile of Frank Sinatra, and perhaps Dean Martin anticipated this.*

For whatever reason, Christgau failed to catch on as a New Journalist. But he did manage to complete one demanding reporting assignment while at *Esquire*, and it stands among the finest rock journalism of the period.

The 1967 Monterey International Pop Festival was an ideal *Esquire* story: a hip, star-laden scene that seemed to pull together the loose threads of the counterculture. If Christgau didn't cover it, someone else surely would have. But in addition to suiting to the magazine's needs, Monterey also offered Christgau an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity about the uncertain direction of rock music in the late '60s and to address the tensions at the heart of his own aesthetic preferences. While he held out hope for a racially integrated national festival, Monterey seemed more likely to confirm the ascent of self-conscious white art music being led by the Doors and Jefferson Airplane. What was to go down as the *ne plus ultra* of the Summer of Love looked to Christgau like a transparent attempt to bring the geographically-specific phenomenon of the original hippies—who had already "fled from the bus tour" by the time journalists arrived in Haight-Ashbury—to a bigger stage.⁵⁷ Hence the choice of location: Monterey, spitting distance from San Francisco, but still accessible to the Angelenos festival organizers hoped to attract.

⁵⁶ Christgau, telephone interview with author, Dec. 1, 2008

^{*} In 2003, *Esquire*'s editors voted "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" the magazine's best story ever.

⁵⁷ Christgau, "Anatomy of a Love Festival," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 14

Published in Esquire in January 1968, seven months after the event, Christgau's "Anatomy of a Love Festival" provides a historical chronicle of Monterey Pop, tracing the festival from its planning stages through its improbable success and arriving finally at a vision of a major cultural transition. The essay masterfully captures the various tensions involved in the concert's conception—between organizers and law officials, organizers and bands, underground bands and hit-makers, "burghers" and "anti-burghers," hippies and the onlookers who envied them—then observes in awe as those tensions seemingly vaporize in the balmy aura of a California weekend. More than a concert review, the essay is a definitive account of a rare instance of the late-'60s counterculture fully living up to its own hype. The serendipitous meeting of several problematic situations—the rise of "serious" white rock, the increasing neglect of black music, the national infatuation with hippies—was a perfect occasion for Christgau: an event of historical significance that could only be sufficiently addressed in the vernacular he knew better than anyone. That he narrated the festival through the lens of his own skepticism only helps the piece communicate the intensity of a unique weekend in American history.

Festival brainchild Ben Shapiro, a young Hollywood entrepreneur, dreamed of an event that would have absolutely confirmed Christgau's remark about rock and roll exfoliating itself: "a 'music mart' for the serious creators and uncommitted experimenters in 'mainstream' music."⁵⁸ But Shapiro and his partner, Alan Pariser, were quickly supplanted by publicist Derek Taylor and a de facto governing board of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 15

artists that included John Phillips of the Mamas & the Papas, Paul Simon, Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger, and Brian Wilson. Phillips, the major player among the artists, introduced a bohemian ethos to the "hip show business" of Shapiro's original scheme; he and Simon "suggested a nonprofit festival run and financed by artists."⁵⁹ Phillips had leverage because he knew Shapiro desperately wanted the Mamas & the Papas—a hugely successful Hollywood-via-East-Village supergroup that would draw big numbers while lending an air of bohemian authenticity—to perform. Along with his producer, Lou Adler, Phillips effectively shanghaied the event's planning from Shapiro.

The conflict between Shapiro and Adler-Phillips dramatized the forces driving the transformation of pop music. Shapiro was an early partisan of the highfalutin anticommercialism being institutionalized by *Rolling Stone*. Adler and Phillips, meanwhile, were more sympathetic to mainstream taste, but their vision had severe limitations. The two sides overlapped enough not to shut down the festival altogether, but the path to its realization was tangled up in the contradictions of rock music and promotion in the late '60s. Neither Shapiro nor Phillips liked to think of themselves as elitists, but they were businessmen whose clientele consisted of young people who thought of themselves more seriously than young people had ever done before. In 1967, pop music was no longer escapist entertainment; "it was becoming the symbol of a generation that felt that it might embody real change."⁶⁰ The rock audience expected their favorite bands to give voice to "deeper" feelings, which in turn

⁵⁹ Ibid., 16

⁶⁰ Frith, "1967: The Year It All Came Together," <u>http://www.rocksbackpages.com</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

contributed to a renunciation of rock and roll's essential silliness. Both Shapiro and Phillips wished to satisfy and exploit this audience, but they had very different ideas of how to go about doing so. A large outdoor festival was a perfect way to mark a watershed moment—the dawn of a new era in which, as George Martin said, "the recording art [changed] from something that merely made amusing sounds into something which will stand the test of time as a valid art form."⁶¹ But this notion that rock had somehow fundamentally graduated to a higher stage called into question the very purpose of making music. Festival organizers faced the same tension between populism and individualism that Simon Frith sees at the heart of rock and roll's shift from pop to anti-pop: the choice "to please and put together a mass audience or to please and put together oneself."⁶²

Shapiro, whose idea of a "significant" musical event aligned him with the individualist school of thought, was ultimately elbowed out of the proceedings by Phillips, who seemed to have a more populist vision for the festival. But while Adler and Phillips may have envisioned a mainstream festival ("indeed, there is a sense in which a pop festival should be just that"⁶³), the lineup leaned heavily on California bands. Teenybop, Brit Rock, the East Coast, and—to Christgau's deep dismay—black music were underrepresented. The lineup was designed to attract "the love crowd," Christgau's byword for trendy bohemians. "Like the hippies, those shadow folk who will necessarily partake in what follows, the love crowd flourishes wherever the

⁶¹ George Martin quoted in Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Christgau, "Anatomy of a Love Festival," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 16.

living is easy, and almost by definition, it is white."⁶⁴ The love crowd represented the popularization of bohemianism, "the enthusiasm of ordinary, suburban Americans for cultural revolution."⁶⁵

It seemed to Christgau that the excitement and anxiety leading up to the festival epitomized the exfoliation and whitening of rock and roll. He narrated the power struggle between organizers and local government with an air of ironic detachment that barely concealed his suspicion of both sides. The love crowd would certainly dig the "serious white rock music" that dominated the talent roster.⁶⁶ But Monterey's city officials worried about the influx of shaggy-haired twentysomethings. Amid rumors that all proceeds would go to the Diggers, an anarchist theatrical troupe in Northern California, "excitement began to grow, among the surfers on the Southland beaches and the lumpenhippies in the Haight and students and groupies and potheads everywhere."⁶⁷ Organizers anticipated a turnout between 100,000 and 200,000, far in excess of what municipal officials would be comfortable with. In order to allay the local government's anxiety, Phillips distributed copies of his "Articles of Incorporation," which cast the festival in a much different light compared with that under which it was being sold to the kids. "Papa John assured the burghers that festival profits would 'not go to a hippie organization' and insisted that 'the show is designed for those in the nineteen-to-thirty-five age group."⁶⁸ The

⁶⁴ Ibid., 14

⁶⁵ Frank, Conquest of Cool, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Christgau, "Anatomy of a Love Festival," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 19

Articles also promised to pull any especially uppity (i.e., riot-inciting) groups off the stage.

Meanwhile, the fans and bands that were to constitute the meat and potatoes of the festival began to suspect a bait-and-switch. Christgau seemed to relish detailing the corner into which Phillips and Adler had politicked themselves:

As June 16 approached, Dan Rifkin, manager of the Grateful Dead, and Chet Helms, of the Family Dog and the Aragon Ballroom, were feuding with Adler. Are you gonna let the people on the Fairgrounds, Lou? What do you mean, for a buck? Music should be for everyone, Lou; those prices are ridiculous. These bands are all rich; why do you have to pay expenses? And everything first class, Lou? Is that movie Pennebaker's shooting for A.B.C. gonna be distributed in theaters? The Dead have a booking Friday night in San Francisco, Lou, we can't make it Friday. Where are all those kids gonna crash, Lou?⁶⁹

Christgau smelled disaster, and he wasn't shocked. He had seen the original hippies disappear in "an avalanche of copy," and Monterey seemed more and more like a confused co-optation effort.⁷⁰ Like everyone on the Pacific coast, he wondered whether it would come off.

The grace with which it *did* come off forced Christgau to reevaluate pop bohemianism. The love crowd announced its peaceful intentions to event security—hundreds of Monterey police officers—by handing out flowers. ("What can you do when a barefoot girl smiles and offers you a daisy?"⁷¹) Nobody died; nothing was burned that wasn't mean to be. Instead of making marijuana arrests—or seizing "any of the thousands of acid tabs that were distributed free all

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 14

⁷¹ Ibid., 21

weekend"⁷²—Monterrey Police Chief Frank Marinello wound up letting his officers off duty early. "The rule of love" took hold.⁷³

While many of the twelve hundred press people who had managed to wrangle passes were awed by the San Francisco Sound on display, including performances by Jefferson Airplane, Moby Grape, and the Grateful Dead (a rumored Beatles set turned out to be just that), Christgau was more impressed by the hitch-free logistics. "Without organization—at once very tight and remarkably unautocratic, which is to say, intelligent—it would have been a shambles."⁷⁴ The success wasn't entirely Phillips's, though; it also belonged to the love crowd. The Monterey International Pop Festival was a triumph of compromise, and the group spirit proved too strong for Christgau to maintain his defensive stance as a skeptical observer. However naïve and limited a group they might have been, the crowd's overwhelming enthusiasm brought the stars into line, creating a context that not only facilitated a peaceful festival but also the idea that it meant something. "Yea verily, the festival was something for everyone to be proud of, even to the last teenybopper."⁷⁵

Christgau covered the music as dispassionately as he could, emphasizing performances he didn't like but the crowd did. He opened the piece with a long tribute to Otis Redding that telegraphed his ambivalence about the event and bit back slightly at the roster-makers for under-representing black music. But in all but a few places, his criticism sounds positively disarmed. "John Phillips introduced [Mike] Bloomfield: 'One of the two or three best guitarists in the world.' I think that's

⁷² Ibid., 22

⁷³ Ibid., 21

⁷⁴ Ibid., 34

⁷⁵ Ibid., 32

excessive, but many don't."⁷⁶ Only a scathing Jimi Hendrix dis ("a psychedelic Uncle Tom"⁷⁷) betrayed Christgau's intuitive hostility to the new developments in rock.

Charmed by the love crowd and its entrancing vibes, Christgau nevertheless produced an astute ethnography that evinced many of the broader tensions he was in the process of negotiating himself:

There is a lot of talk about the new rock audience—critical, unhysterical, intelligent. The festival was predicated on such talk. But the issue is more complicated. The love crowd is an intelligent and mature audience, but it demands to be turned on—that is, its attitude toward intelligence and maturity is stubbornly emotional and childlike. It reveres enthusiasm. It is made up of teenagers who have no great desire to grow up and adults who have never completely renounced their adolescence. And like any kids, they know how to enjoy a good time; once the vibrations establish themselves, it's uncool to cause static. That doesn't mean the audience was totally uncritical. But often it responded as much to itself as to what was happening onstage—autohype.⁷⁸

For all his misgivings about the counterculture and its mystical tendencies, Christgau dug the benevolent ambiance of the festival. He saw good things about autohype ("the obverse of showmanship, and only a very warm crowd can generate it") and lamented the unlikelihood of another Monterey.⁷⁹ The love crowd appealed to Christgau because it synthesized his pop and bohemian impulses. In ways that he didn't expect and that went against his own inclinations, the festival momentarily resolved the tensions between art and pleasure, seriousness and fun, which had bothered Christgau since college. The warm glow of Monterey might only last an instant, he knew, but

⁷⁶ Ibid., 24

⁷⁷ Ibid., 31

⁷⁸ Ibid., 22-23

⁷⁹ Ibid., 25

the important thing was that the festival had allowed a glimpse of revolutionary possibility. "The love crowd may never come together again. But something will happen, which is all that matters."⁸⁰ If nothing else, the unresolved contradictions of the counterculture proved that rock music wasn't going anywhere. It meant too much to too many people, and too many people had too much money invested in it.

Despite his brief seduction by the love crowd and its autohype, Christgau's enthusiasm was short lived. Three years after the Summer of Love, he returned to the Monterey Fairgrounds and only dimly recognized it as the site of a cultural milestone. He was there to cover 1970 Big Sur Folk Festival. The event drew a scant crowd of roughly seven thousand, but on the Saturday of festival weekend there would be a "second" Monterey Pop Festival. It would be like '67 all over again, just with smaller crowds, softer amps, and an even more provincial lineup. Christgau's recap for the *Voice*, "A Musical Weekend," treated the original Monterey Pop like ancient history:

I remember Monterey as a turning point, the beginning of a hope that would have seemed entirely chimerical a year or two before and proved to be exactly that. Yes, that was where I had first seen Quicksilver, the Airplane, and the Dead, but it was also my first exposure to Jimi Hendrix and Al Wilson. I had shaken hands with Brian Jones there and led my piece on the festival with a long tribute to Otis Redding. They were gone too. Monterey was a happy accident, and I no longer placed any credence in its myth.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid., 34

⁸¹ Christgau, "A Musical Weekend," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 121.

CHAPTER 2

Street lamps may yet to have been installed in SOHO in 1969, but the vibrancy and familiarity of the New York City gave Christgau a sense of stability and purpose. In mid-1968, *Esquire* dismissed Christgau. Shortly thereafter, Ellen Willis, his companion of three years, ended their relationship. After having waltzed into the hottest venue in journalism as a 25-year-old with little magazine experience, Christgau suddenly found himself unemployed and without a clear career path or personal direction. But rather than uproot, he decided to stay in New York amid the cynical, aggressive bohemian types he knew and understood.

Having sensed ahead of time that his term at *Esquire* was winding down, Christgau had preemptively contemplated his next venture. And at a time when an *Esquire* byline was the journalistic equivalent of a Harvard law degree, Christgau would never starve. But what chances did he have as roving Wolfe-style journo? *"Esquire* gave me some reporting pieces that I fucked up," he admits. "But it's not like I had any lessons. I had to figure it out entirely on my own."⁸² Most likely he would have figured it out eventually. But patience seldom attends great ambition, and Christgau wanted to be something more than a merely good writer. Meanwhile, it was no sure bet he could become a legendary magazine journalist by act of will. The field was crowded, Christgau's eye for the emulsive detail not as eagle-sharp as Leibling's, his memory not as photographic as Wolfe's.

By contrast, academia, for all its stuffiness about the longhairs and their rock

⁸² Robert Christgau, telephone interview with author, Dec. 1, 2007.

music, offered security and a relatively easygoing lifestyle. Rock criticism and academia may have fancied themselves ideological adversaries during the '60s, but that didn't stop many writers from playing both sides of the fence. Greil Marcus pursued a doctorate in political science at UC Berkeley. *Real Paper* music editor and *Rolling Stone* reviewer Jim Miller completed a Ph.D in the "History of Ideas" at Brandeis. The anti-social madcap genius Richard Meltzer was booted from Yale's philosophy graduate program for refusing to write about anything *but* rock music. If rock critics and academics viewed each other suspiciously in this period, they did so from opposite sides of a very, very short fence.

Christgau could have easily transitioned into a life of scholarship. After leaving *Esquire* he had taught briefly at Cal Arts, where the wife of his friend Larry Dietz worked as a secretary. (Dietz's wife, Marianne Partridge, would later go on to edit the *Village Voice*.) But something about the whole enterprise felt phony to Christgau. Meanwhile, he started writing for the *Village Voice* for an unglamorous forty dollars per column (around \$220 today). Underwhelmed by their wages, Christgau gave the *Voice* what he felt like giving it. "I started blowing it off because they weren't paying me enough. That was my theory: They're paying me \$40, I'm gonna do whatever's in my head."⁸³ But Christgau took too much pride in his writing to phone it in. He began to use the *Voice* as a ground for experimentation.

In addition to contributing columns and essays, Christgau established a regular feature at the *Voice*. Originally conceived as a silly aside, his "Consumer Guide" took Secular Music's survey approach to its logical conclusion: Graded

⁸³ Ibid.

capsule reviews of noteworthy new albums. Pithy, witty, and easy to digest, Consumer Guide quickly amassed a loyal following whose ranks seldom hesitated to send Christgau their opinions and suggestions. The fan interaction was a kind of consolation for Christgau, who not only took a huge pay cut from *Esquire* (where the going rate for a two or three thousand word article was around \$500) but also faced a greatly diminished audience.⁸⁴ In 1969 the *Voice*'s circulation hit 138,000,⁸⁵ while *Esquire* shipped over a million magazines each month.⁸⁶ Still, he had found a place where his writing was welcome, and the fact that it happened to be the *Village Voice*, Norman Mailer's baby, only sweetened the deal.

It looked more and more like only one path could satisfy Christgau's outsize ambitions. Rock criticism offered unique opportunities—and an excuse to listen to rock music all day. Rock had buoyed Christgau during his uncertain post-Dartmouth years—"spiritual sustenance," he called it⁸⁷—and even during his most precarious moments at the turn of the decade his criticism continued to win paychecks and plaudits. If it was becoming more and more apparent that pop music's potential to galvanize the body politic was indeed chimerical, there remained very real hope for the "purely imaginary inner space shared by people of disparately similar

http://www.villagevoice.com/specials/0543,50thexgau,69321,31.html, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

⁸⁵ "50th Anniversary Timeline: 1969," *Village Voice*, Oct. 18, 2005, <u>http://www.villagevoice.com/specials/0542,50th1969,69215,31.html</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

⁸⁴ Christgau, "Can't Stop the Music: The 'Voice' Invents Rock Criticism," *Village Voice*, Oct. 18, 2005,

⁸⁶ Frank DiGiacomo, "The Esquire Decade," *Vanity Fair*, Jan. 2007, <u>http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/esquire200701?currentPage=8</u>, p. 8, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

⁸⁷ Christgau, "Gap Again," Village Voice, Mar. 3, 1969, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/gap-69.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

backgrounds listening in private to the same music at the same time,"as the Consumer Guide reader letters proved.⁸⁸ Monterey had not quite convinced Christgau of "the efficacy of love and flowers,"⁸⁹ but its ecstatic communitarianism secured the foundations of the animating myth that "engaged and shaped me as a writer, as a listener, and as a thinking, breathing subject."⁹⁰

The process by which Christgau arrived at the decision to commit to rock criticism parallels his intellectual development. Christgau remembers his 1963 encounter with Tom Wesselmann's Great American Nudes—specifically the one painting into which Wesselmann had built a radio—as an epiphanic experience. To Christgau, the paintings suggested "some kind of continuity—or even equation" between high and low; "they were the beginning of my theory of pop," he wrote.⁹¹ And yet Christgau, when he arrived at *Esquire* in 1967, he had no plans to become a full-time critic. He wanted to be a latter day Mailer or another Tom Wolfe. His music column was to be merely instrumental in gaining a foothold at "that citadel of writerly new journalism."⁹² Professional criticism hewed too close for Christgau's comfort to "the secular theology of new-critical literary analysis."⁹³ It betrayed his "baseball-and-soda-pop past in Queens" and castrated the pleasure-oriented experience of popular art.⁹⁴

But, for all his distrust of the high church approach to art, Christgau never

⁸⁸ Christgau, "Introduction," Any Old Way You Choose It, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), p. xvi

⁸⁹ Christgau, "A Counter in Search of a Culture," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 5

⁹⁰ Christgau, "Introduction," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. xviii

⁹¹ Christgau, "A Counter in Search of a Culture," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 2

⁹² Ibid., 4

⁹³ Ibid., 3

⁹⁴ Ibid., 3

fully settled into the generational mold of '60s bohemianism. His suspicion of hippies and California was merely symptomatic of a more fundamental tendency to stand aloof from the era's populist challenges to authority. In his own words, Christgau was "an antibohemian bohemian," and criticism suited his polemical temperament.⁹⁵ In his revealing 1973 personal essay "A Counter in Search of a Culture," he admitted (as if readers couldn't already tell) to taking pleasure in argumentation. "Show me an idea and I'll show what's wrong with it, and six months later I'll show you what's wrong with my objections."⁹⁶ This attitude would have ill-suited him for a long run at *Esquire*, whose readers and editors "equated credibility with a certain ironic 'objectivity.""⁹⁷ Currying favor with such a crowd would have meant damping his polemical humanism in favor of a holier-than-thou assuredness, just as embracing the love crowd wholeheartedly would have meant surrendering the irony and critical distance he valued. The critic, he was beginning to see, should be neither an authority nor a hipster, but a candid, provocative, self-undermining superfan. By 1973, he had arrived at the insight "that criticism that circumvents its own subjectivity also tends to circumvent its obligation to be useful."98

Once settled at the *Voice* Christgau felt comfortable—more comfortable than he ever did at *Esquire*—asserting his polemical side. In Secular Music Christgau had strove for "the epigram, the paradox, the wise-ass remark," but at the *Voice* his increased freedom prompted more serious introspection.⁹⁹ Rather than defending hip

⁹⁵ Ibid., 3

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4

⁹⁷ Ibid., 8

⁹⁸ Ibid., 9

⁹⁹ Ibid., 8

culture, he could now analyze, celebrate, and mock it in the virtual company of likeminded readers. Forced to acknowledge the privileges and responsibilities of being a paid fan, he began to investigate the assumptions underlying his work. During his first years at the *Voice*, Christgau evolved a conception of criticism that would inform his work for years to come. He was thinking like a critic, even if he hesitated to think of himself as one.

Far from presenting a schematic or rubric of any sort, the Christgau theory of criticism was an array of insights basically amounting to a single axiom: Rock criticism is only as good as writing as it is useful as a service. But here one must be careful, because Christgau defined usefulness somewhat counterintuitively. "Ultimately, after all, [criticism] is rationalized opinion, and the reader has to be able to compare his prejudices against those of the critic."¹⁰⁰ Rock criticism, then, was only as useful as the critic was willing to expose his prejudices through a vivid, engaging persona.

In 1971, in his companion essay to the first *Village Voice* year-end "Pazz & Jop" critics poll, Christgau wrote, "I figure a rock critic ought to have three qualities: interest, arrogance, and writing ability."¹⁰¹ Knowledge of rock and roll history, then much harder to come by in books than it is today, did not make the list. But those who possessed it occupied a position of power. Who was going to tell them they were wrong? And who *but* them was going to tell the real tyros they were wrong? "People had to know what had been on the radio for the last ten years," Christgau says, "but

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 9

¹⁰¹ Christgau, "What Does It All Mean?" *The Village Voice*, Feb. 17., 1972, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/pnj/pj71.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008.

the presumption was they would."¹⁰² Research was impossible. "In the beginning...there was nothing except to interview somebody and find out, maybe, and look at the charts; there were no histories of blues, no histories of anything."¹⁰³ This situation had mixed consequences for writing. Because all it seemed an aspiring rock critic had to do was put up his hand, "a lot of incompetents and nonentities" found work in the field.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, passionate fans with interesting opinions and strong writing skills wrangled jobs where their lack of hard journalism credentials may have stonewalled them only ten years later. There were also few disincentives to gamble with ideas. "We did have a lot of leeway," Christgau says. "I saw [rock criticism] as a place where you could do vanguard stuff in journalism, which in my notion had become by then the notion of subverting pop from within. I saw journalism as a pop form as much as I saw rock as a pop form."¹⁰⁵

Christgau's experience and chops marked him as an early leader in the field. If he wished, he could have a hand in building something potent from the ground up. This temptation proved too great to resist. "What the hell," he recalls having thought sometime in the early '70s, "I was a rock critic."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Christgau, telephone interview with author, Nov. 1, 2007

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Christgau, "A Counter In Search of a Culture," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 7

CHAPTER 3

The Consumer Guide was not Christgau's only contribution to the *Voice*. He frequently turned out longer articles, including artist-focused think pieces and the occasional book review. But the Consumer Guide helped him elaborate his views in efficient, accessible writing. The consistent frame of the column also gave Christgau a canvas for developing a critical persona. It was his ticket to recognition.

Christgau's work ethic distinguished his criticism early on and continues to set him apart today. From the beginning of his career, Christgau was a more dedicated listener than most of his colleagues. "I tried to listen to everything the record companies sent me," he boasted, "a task so time- and soul-consuming that my rockcrit cohab, Ellen Willis, would banish me and my dreck to a backup apartment whenever the drone began to get to her."¹⁰⁷ If Willis, a trailblazing and insightful critic in her own right, couldn't stand how much music Christgau listened to, no one could accuse him of not doing his homework.

An avowed populist, Christgau initially conceived the Consumer Guide as a form of criticism that embodied his theory of pop, "in which rock and roll's broad appeal was intrinsic to its aesthetic value."¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, he wanted his writing to reach out rather than to protect rarified coterie taste. But by 1970, rock had begun to splinter into distinct, sometimes fiercely barricaded genres, and as more and more

 ¹⁰⁷ Robert Christgau, "The Guide," *Robert Christgau's Record Guide: Rock Albums of the Seventies*, (New York: Tricknor & Fields, 1981),
 <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg70/guide.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

fans and reviewers dismissed one style or another for being too "commercial," Christgau started to conceive of aesthetic value in different terms.

Even as Consumer Guide streamlined the enterprise of critical evaluation, Christgau's opinions only reached so far. Whereas at *Esquire* he negotiated the challenge of writing for a mainstream audience by imagining and targeting a typical listener, Christgau now encountered a narrower, albeit more knowledgeable, set of readers. Although he liked to think that his community of followers stretched from Harlem to Oregon, and included a broad range of rock fan types, the bulk of its members were-like Christgau at Dartmouth-"bright, white, college-age," reserved about Top 40 and black rock, and happy to think of themselves as intellectual.¹⁰⁹ "Our readers weren't ordinary fans—they did read, after all. Like us [critics], or at least not unlike us, they wanted provocation and formal acuteness from rock and roll."¹¹⁰ Christgau was forced to reorient his mission: Instead of quixotically battling elitist pretense on behalf of The People, he would now use the intelligence and willingness of his readers to explode their aesthetic horizons and bring the most music to the broadest exposure. The story of that transformation is the story of how Robert Christgau invented rock criticism as we now know it.

Superficially, the first Consumer Guide reviews look a lot like Christgau's latest. Here are two assessments, in full:

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

ALEXANDER SPENCE: *Oar* (Columbia) Strangest record of the year, slow and lugubrious, completely lacking the explosive energy Spence used to bring to Moby Grabe when he called himself Skip and swung axes at people; by anyone else it would disappear immediately. C MINUS (July 1969)¹¹¹

THE WHITE STRIPES: *Icky Thump* (Warner Bros.) Jumping from defunct quasi-indie V2 to ailing quasi-major Warner Bros., Jack White pretends his neoplasticism (spare industrial angularity theorized as aesthetic mysticism) is constructive (brawny industrial angularity theorized as people's practicality). The broad strokes and hot mix are a formalist's populist gesture and a fist shaken at downward market trends. But formalism fans shouldn't let that stop them; immigration fans either. Playing at world, at heavy, at soul, he arts it up plenty and protests a little. A MINUS (November 2007)¹¹²

Artist name, album title, record label, three to five sentences of salient observations, a

letter grade: The template has not changed, if lots else has.

With grades doled out on an A through E scale, a typical early Consumer

Guide featured a handful of A minuses, many Bs, a smattering of Cs, and usually no

more than two Ds. Occasionally, though, Christgau summarily shot lesser-known

artists to pieces. In the July 31, 1969 installment, he went off-scale to award Kim

Fowley's Outrageous an F, calling the folk singer "an outrageous shuck." In the

introduction to that same column, Christgau elucidated his grading system for

confused readers:

¹¹¹ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (1)," *Village Voice*, July 10, 1969, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg1.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹¹² Christgau, "Consumer Guide: November 2007: White Stripes Not Icky but Nick Rates Low," *MSN Music*, Nov. 2007, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg2007-11.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

Although any rating system is absurd—always based on short-term judgments and incapable of implying ambivalence—there is no reasonable alternative. . . . Look, it's fairly simple. A means I like it a lot, B means I like it some or admire it a lot, C means I like it a little or admire it some, D means I don't like it or admire it little, and E means shit. What more can I say?¹¹³

Because they embodied a kind of final authority, or presumed to, the grades made it possible to dismiss records in fewer words. (What more *could* he say?) Consumer Guide parodied the storied tradition of disinterested critical writing by taking that tradition to its logical extreme. To irate readers and writers who thought it blasphemous to subject works of art to an objective grading system, Christgau bluntly cited his "obligation to be useful."¹¹⁴ If consumer guidance was "the lowest form of criticism," as Simon Frith has written, that was precisely the point:

He called his record review column Christgau's Consumer Guide in mockery of over-earnest Marcusian lefties—in his words, "to annoy left-wing cheese-heads." And his letter grades could also be taken as a dig at the academy. If we can confidently grade students why not artists too? But this is not just a joke. The Consumer Guide and the mock-college marking scheme were also answers to an intellectual's question. What is a popular culture critic for?¹¹⁵

Not, Consumer Guide answered, for pretending popular culture isn't produced and consumed in the system in which it is produced and consumed.

The meting out of judgment in the form of grades rests on the unspoken

¹¹³ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (1)"

¹¹⁴ Christgau, "A Counter In Search of a Culture," *Any Old Way You Choose It*, p. 10 ¹¹⁵ Simon Frith, "An Essay on Criticism," *Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough: Essays in Honor of Robert Christgau*, ed. Tom Carson, Kit Rachlis, and Jeff Salomon. (Mount Pleasant, TX: Nortex Press, 2002), <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-fest/frith.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

premise that the examiner will apply more or less the same criteria to every example submitted for grading. In reality, this seldom happens. Prejudices function subliminally, and it is nigh on impossible to neutralize *all* opinion-influencing variables in an evaluation setting. But we hand out grades anyway, in classrooms and offices and sporting arenas, letting relative objectivity pass for the real thing. The innovation of Consumer Guide was that it acknowledged the fallacious premise of objective criticism and, by taking that premise to an extreme and loudly proclaiming the fact of its doing so, managed to overcome the fallacy. This is what Frith and other boosters of Christgau mean when they say his grades were a joke. The operative preposition is "on"—Consumer Guide was a joke *on* the leftist critical institution, and Christgau wasn't the only one who found it funny.

While Christgau proudly (and, as he tells it, drunkenly) christened himself the "dean" of American rock critics, he also expressed fear that Consumer Guide might become respectable. He disavowed the expert label at the same time he very clearly posited himself as an expert on rock music. Christgau overcame this paradox by using sincerity as a theatrical trope, declaring his weaknesses to his readers before giving them a chance to figure them out themselves. At *Esquire*, Christgau had claimed to speak frankly of his personal tastes, but he sometimes wrapped his judgment in potted ethnology and hokey moralizing. He gradually learned to disclose his weak spots more smoothly, in ways that humanized rather than discredited him. He encouraged Consumer Guide readers to write to him and suggest records for review. "This is your

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column," he wrote.¹¹⁶ To readers whose suggestions Christgau actually took, it certainly must have felt that way—at least, that is, until the Dean mashed their favorite band.

Blame the readers for all the obscure dreck that found its way into Christgau's crosshairs in the early days. Perusing C and lower records from the first few Consumer Guides, I came across few recognizable names. Steppenwolf, the Guess Who, and Country Joe & The Fish stand out, but Hoyt Axton? The Litter? Lotti Golden? In one drubbing Christgau cites a reader's tentative verdict, then goes on to award an E minus to an LP by the immortal Aorta.

Christgau frequently expressed guilt over laying into so many bands, but he also doubted anyone would take Consumer Guide seriously enough to complain. It came as a shock, then, to discover that so many people seemed so up in arms over Christgau's opinions. It just so happened that Christgau's personal solution to his vocational and critical dilemmas overlapped with the record industry's need for a feedback mechanism. While Consumer Guide probably did not significantly affect the commercial fate of top-selling bands like Pink Floyd, it definitely influenced the marketing strategy behind smaller acts. "If you're a small label and you've got an artist, and you've got no sense whatsoever of what sort of appeal they're going to have," Simon Frith says, "if Bob gives them a rave review, you're going to say, 'Well at least a significant rock critic who knows his stuff says it's good.' And that's going to make the record company think, 'It's worthwhile putting effort into selling this,

¹¹⁶ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (2)," *Village Voice*, July 31, 1969, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg2.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

because obviously it's got possibility.¹¹⁷ Fans, meanwhile, looked for reliable mediation to help negotiate a music world of increasing variety and complexity. If the Guide was meant as a joke, not everyone took it as such.

Introducing the sixth column, he remarked on the column's success ("my name... has become notorious throughout the record industry") and cracked wise about critical power tripping: "What a satisfaction it is to ruin the careers of four or five young musicians with a tap of the D key. Criticism is a thankless profession, after all, and I have a right to my kicks just like anyone else."¹¹⁸ Christgau had earned his kicks—but by the early '70s he had also haphazardly come into the critical authority that eluded him at *Esquire*. Surprised to find himself with something to lose, he went on the defensive:

Especially at night I am tortured by self-doubt, asking what right a parasite like myself has to sit in judgment on creative people, especially the young and disinherited, getting rich on checks from *The Voice* while artists starve. And so in this Consumer Guide I will attempt to shore up my sagging self-respect. That's right, it's 'Consumer Guide Meets the Heavies,' in which the world's most destructive super-consumer enters a fair fight, applying the letters A to E with all the accompanying plusses and minuses to some of the greatest names in rock music. Needless to say, he loses.¹¹⁹

While addressing the unexpected popularity of the column, "Consumer Guide Meets the Heavies" is also a telling late example of Christgau's early-career populist radicalism. "By my standards," he wrote, "it is almost impossible for a rock artist with a large audience and a couple of records behind him to produce an incompetent

¹¹⁷ Frith, telephone interview with author, Mar. 20, 2008

 ¹¹⁸ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (6)," *Village Voice*, Jan. 15, 1970, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg6.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ¹¹⁹ Ibid.

(D) or contemptible (E) recording, because it is only rarely that the rock audience will support music that is truly incompetent or contemptible."¹²⁰ A year later, Christgau would take on the heavies once again, and once again he would proclaim defeat, awarding high marks to mainstream staples once and future. The Beach Boys, Canned Heat, Delaney & Bonnie, Derek & the Dominoes, the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Johnny Winter, and Stevie Wonder all received top honors. But Christgau prefaced the rematch with some qualifications about his enthusiasm for mainstream rock and its world-building potential. Commenting on the fragmentation of the rock audience, he wrote: "There seems to come a time in the growth of any mass popular art when the size of its audience actually begins to force it to appeal to that lowest common denominator critics are always yapping about."¹²¹ While Christgau himself was not content to yap about that denominator, and while he forecasted a positive outcome to the stratification that was already well under way ("A return to smaller sub-audiences can signal a revitalization that will permit some grander synthesis in the future"¹²²), he nevertheless acknowledged the increasing definition and quality of non-popular subfields.

By the 24th Consumer Guide, Christgau's last before temporarily leaving the *Voice* for a two-year tenure at the Long Island daily paper *Newsday*, the synthesis he foretold had yet to occur. In the column, Christgau awarded jazz-prog wonks Mahavishnu Orchestra an A on the strength of these words: "No backbeat, no voice, no concessions, but the soaring prophecies and jangled contradictions of this inspired

¹²⁰ Ibid.

 ¹²¹ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (15)," *Village Voice*, Jan. 7, 1971,
 <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg15.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ¹²² Ibid.

electric music are worth the effort."¹²³ Meanwhile, relative "heavies" Jeff Beck, Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Dionne Warwick, and Yes all received B's or lower. Having failed in almost three years to fully shore up his sagging confidence, Christgau felt restless, and a well-paying full-time offer from a respectable daily newspaper was hard to turn down—even if the job would separate him from Manhattan. "The problem with creative freedom, as I have often pointed out, is that it tempts the creator to wallow in it, and I wondered periodically whether my comfortable relationship with my audience was good for my writing.... Writing for suburbanites, I thought, might be just the challenge I needed."¹²⁴

In two years at *Newsday*, Christgau was never satisfied he reached a broader audience than at the *Voice*. He wrote mostly longer-form criticism, including a Sunday column, while the paper relegated Consumer Guide to "capsules"—two each week printed under the column, with occasional 500-word batches published in the review section. Splitting duties as a writer and editor, Christgau found he couldn't keep up with his own ideas. His listening habits had not changed much; if anything, working closely with writers only exposed him to more music. But his essays and columns required a narrowed focus, too narrow to do justice to a dozen records at once. And so Christgau came to rely even more on the Consumer Guide as a place to test records, test ideas, test himself. He adapted a writing style that enabled him to negotiate the time constraints of his job without circumventing his own rigorous standards of method and content. In place of grace and accessibility, economy and

¹²³ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (24)," *Village Voice*, Mar. 2, 1972, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg24.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹²⁴ Christgau, "A Counter In Search of a Culture," Any Old Way You Choose It, p. 11

perspicacity were the new top priorities. "I got into the habit of condensing one or two fairly complex ideas into most entries, which expanded to an average of eighty words. My one-liners became sharper, less willful. And while my evaluations still sprang from personal pleasure, I was no longer content merely to react and pass judgment—the first person singular became an option rather than a matter of principle."¹²⁵ It was in this period, as he tried to deal with an overwhelming workload by cramming more meaning into fewer words, that Christgau began to evolve his famously dense style. Far from an effort to make philistines blanch, Consumer Guide's forbiddingly packed prose came out of a frugal attempt to be more comprehensive.

When Christgau returned to the *Voice* as full-time music editor in 1974, he not only brought back a refined style but also some seriously bulked-up editing chops. The Detroit fanzine *Creem*, which had reprinted monthly compilations of Consumer Guide during Christgau's *Newsday* term, continued to do so, bringing sustained national exposure to the increasingly idiosyncratic column. As an eminent figure in the *gauche* rockcrit trade, Christgau was seen less and less as a contrarian gadfly; he was becoming an arbiter of downtown hip. If his opinions did not receive universal ratification, his writing inspired awe and respect. And his skills as an editor ingratiated him with a developing generation of New York rock critics. "Bob is one of the great editors," Jim Miller says.¹²⁶ Simply because he presided over one of the most prolific and vibrant music sections during a good time for rock criticism,

¹²⁵ Christgau, "The Guide," *Robert Christgau's Record Guide: Rock Albums of the Seventies*, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg70/guide.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹²⁶ Jim Miller, telephone interview with author, Feb. 18, 2008

Christgau's shadow naturally extends far over the field. But the combination of his writing skills, his abrasive and demanding persona, and "an almost unlimited tolerance for obscurantism" made him something of an avatar.¹²⁷ He found himself in a position to have a significant influence on what it meant to be a rock critic.

On Sep. 12, 1974, Christgau returned to the Voice, invigorated but changed:

Allow me to report that rote boogieing has eroded my granite allegiance to hard rock and roll. Without abandoning my radical democratic pop populist pretensions, I have come to value unabashed intelligence more than seemed appropriate amid the post-utopian vibes of 1969. This means I am listening to jazz and sometimes even learn from a lyric. Times are hard. We'd better hit the fuckers with the best we got.¹²⁸

The rally cry referred to the dilution of the rock mainstream and simultaneous explosion in production. Initially the province of idealistic, pretentious bohemians, album-oriented rock had by the mid-'70s achieved institutional status as the music of white American youth. In sheer numbers, the rock audience continued to grow, but the mainstream was losing its relevance, its power, and its unpredictability. In 1969, the best way to find good music, Christgau thought, was to turn on the radio. "Not all of the most popular rock was good, but most good rock seemed to be popular."¹²⁹ As Christgau began to enjoy more records that sold squat, he suspected that the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Christgau, "Consumer Guide (48)," *Village Voice*, Sept. 12, 1974,
<u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv48.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
¹²⁹ Christgau, "The Guide," *Robert Christgau's Record Guide: Albums of the Seventies*, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg70/guide.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

"unwittingly beneficent"¹³⁰ rock distribution system might be faltering, and coined a new term: Semipopular music. "Not the genteel if gratifying artiness of the late '60s, but arcane stuff with limited mass potential," semipopular music was the only thing Christgau saw keeping rock music from being reduced to a "reactionary species of entertainment."¹³¹

At first, Christgau thought the proliferation of genres brought upon by the fragmentation of the rock audience was bad news. It implied declining cultural significance. But he still felt oddly compelled to process the growing mountain of free music he amassed each month. Even if the album had become a tool of cultural hegemony, as Christgau suggested, artists were doing increasingly interesting things with the format. In Christgau's opinion, the best early '70s musicians dissimulated their commercial status, acting semipopular when in fact they more successful. "Think of Neil Young and Joni Mitchell and David Bowie refusing to repeat obvious successes, or of Steely Dan's apparently premature withdrawal form live performance, or of George Clinton's whitey-baiting, or of Al Green's religious fantasies, or of Eno and Toussaint using rock projects to bankroll more esoteric ventures."¹³² Growing steadily less phobic about non-mainstream music, Christgau called the revamped Consumer Guide "a compulsive record critic's and listener's way

¹³⁰ Christgau, "The Guide," *Robert Christgau's Record Guide: Albums of the Seventies*, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg70/guide.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹³¹ Christgau, "The Decade," *Robert Christgau's Record Guide: Albums of the Seventies*, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg70/decade.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
¹³² H : 1

¹³² Ibid.

of dealing with product flow."133

The mid-'70s were a watershed period for Consumer Guide and accordingly the column underwent a number of changes. The Apr. 7, 1975 column introduced icons designating "Pick Hit" and "Must to Avoid" records, one of each to be chosen every Guide. "The purpose of these illustrations, aside from making the page look good—a purpose I as a print person of course disdain—is to single out special record's from each month's mishmash."¹³⁴ The next month, Christgau announced he would stop discriminating against records shorter than a half hour. (Previously, offenders were marked down a notch in the Guide.) As Christgau put it, "I can see no reason to encourage ballooning arrangements against the dry, terse economy of country records like the Merle Haggard and Gary Stewart."¹³⁵ The idea was to make more room for praise.

During this period, Christgau was especially forthcoming about his aesthetic predispositions. Taking a broader interest in narrower music did not intrinsically satisfy his obligation to be useful, and so he compensated by broadcasting his prejudices in blunt language. The idea was less about defending *his* obscure tastes than about making the cultivation of obscure taste seem like a natural thing to do. Lamenting the dearth of good rock records in 1975, he pinned his hopes on jazz, but added this confession: "I'm trying to write about jazz as a lay listener: My knowledge of the music is entirely non-technical and very incomplete. Since neither kind of

¹³³ Ibid.

 ¹³⁴ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, Apr. 7, 1975, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv4-75.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ¹³⁵ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, May 12, 1975, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv5-75.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

ignorance has ever staunched my interest, I figure it's worth trying to describe what I hear. Pardon the inevitable gaffes."¹³⁶

There were indeed contradictions in this approach. Christgau presented himself as a "lay listener" when it came to jazz in order to cover his tracks, but he also wished to stress that connoisseurship was not required for Consumer Guide usage. Making an example of his ignorance would never work, however, unless Christgau were the farthest thing from ignorant. The style into which Consumer Guide had settled also complicated Christgau's populist ideology. "Christgau's blurbs are like no one else's," Jody Rosen writes, "dense with ideas and allusions, firstperson confessions and invective, highbrow references and slang. They are far too insidery for general readers, and even the biggest music geek can find his writing hard to decipher."¹³⁷ Although the column was meant to cultivate enthusiasm, readers who lacked enthusiasm in the first place would have probably disdained Christgau's style. He wrote prose for people with a shared interest strong enough to withstand occasional feelings of ignorance and inferiority—and the better if you craved such feelings.

Throughout 1975, his Guide intros expressed a desperate longing for quality product. On March 17: "Having completed most of these capsule reviews well before writing this intro, I was a bit alarmed when I looked them over and asked myself how many of the B plusses, or even A minuses, I really wanted to hear again. Good records, undeniably, but they're already stranded on my shelves a month or two after

¹³⁶ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, June 16, 1975, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv6-75.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹³⁷ Jody Rosen, "X-ed Out: The Village Voice fires a famous music critic," *Slate*, Sep. 5, 2006, <u>http://www.slate.com/id/2148997/</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

release.¹³⁸ In May, Christgau named Gary Stewart's *Out of Hand* "the only A record of a lousy month.¹³⁹ Then in June, a nadir: "I don't exactly feel suicidal, that was John Lennon's affliction, but it's bad enough. Never in eight years of compulsive record-checking have I been less interested in the music I get in the mail.¹⁴⁰ Despair over the floundering state of rock music: This is an easy feeling for music afficionados, to whom every two-month dry spell signals a death knell, to tap into. But there is an element of performance to these lamentations. Christgau is positing himself as someone who wants nothing more than to love records but cannot for lack of good ones, thereby slightly softening the blow of the very many disputatious claims he will make in the ensuing paragraphs. In other words, he is priming his readers for a fight.

But just because Christgau made light of rock fans' yen for death knells doesn't mean he wasn't genuinely worried about the state of pop music. Many mid-'70s critics shared feelings of overwhelming uncertainty. Especially concerned were those who, like Christgau, thought the purpose of making music was to please and put together an audience. The increasing strangeness of the names appearing in the *Voice*'s year-end Pazz and Jop poll, an annual survey of rock critics' favorite albums, proved what, exactly? That the mainstream was drying up, or that the underground was getting stronger? To many prominent critics, rock's original appeal was tied to its social significance; even if homespun acts like the Modern Lovers and Wild Tchoupitoulas quietly pushed the boundaries of pop music, what good did that do if

 ¹³⁸ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, Mar. 17, 1975, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv3-75.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ¹³⁹ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, May 12, 1975

¹⁴⁰ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, June 16, 1975

says, "access to all the illicit drugs you could want."¹⁴² Some enterprising critics, like Richard Meltzer, managed to live almost entirely off these industry-funded bacchanals. So while "So You Wanna Be a Rock'n'Roll Writer" sent up the anarchic, unprofessionalized state of rock journalism in 1971, it also highlighted the central conceit of the rock press: In effect bankrolled by the record companies, alternative weeklies and fanzines fully understood the capitalist impetus behind the mass marketing of transgression. "In order to make the racket work," Miller says, "you had to get people who were scruffy, bohemian, anticommercial."¹⁴³ Many writers saw this situation as an easy way to grab modest fame and have some quick fun. Others genuinely worried about corruption. Still others saw industry contamination as an occupational hazard and sought to curtail their contact with artists and junkets as much as realistically possible.

Ever the pragmatist, Christgau belonged to the last camp. Then as today, he cautioned against spending too much time around musicians, and frowned upon his colleagues for taking on gigs within the industry. But while his stance on artist interaction marked him as something of a puritan within the field, Christgau still respected the contributions of *Rolling Stone* mainstay Jon Landau and *Creem*-founder Dave Marsh, critics whose hobnobbing sprang less from the pursuit of a hot story than from the desire to gain "a better aesthetic understanding of the music that animates us all."¹⁴⁴ Christgau had his way of doing things, Landau and Marsh theirs,

¹⁴² Miller, telephone interview with author, Feb. 18, 2008 ¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Christgau, "Yes, There is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But is that Bad for Rock?)" *Village Voice*, Jan. 26, 1976, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/critics-76.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

and so it went.

But while Christgau professed tolerance of his colleagues' debatable practices, he also worried about the increasing prestige and influence of a small number of critics—himself included.

CHAPTER 4

For rock fans marooned in the desert of the mainstream in 1975, Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run* came as a draught of mountain spring water. In his ascent to stardom, Springsteen revealed the cultural and commercial influence of the rock press and especially of an ambitious cohort of New York critics. The rock-critic establishment, as Christgau labeled them, had helped invent rock criticism and apotheosize the music of the late '60s. But what began as a cultural rebellion had by the mid-'70s produced a pretentious intelligentsia, and the commitment of the rock-critic establishment had become indispensable to the marketing arm of the recording industry. While Springsteen's rise revealed the cultural authority and commercial instrumentality of this group of influential critics, it also compromised the group's independence and, in a way, planted the seeds of its destruction.

Christgau didn't write his usual companion essay in the 1975 Pazz & Jop issue, but if he had it might have looked something like "Yes, There is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But Is That Bad for Rock?)" Published in the *Voice* in early 1976, the essay reflected on the state of rock criticism—whose consequences, it turned out, reached farther than any of its veteran practitioners could have anticipated. Under the somewhat tongue-in-cheek pretense of consecrating an official establishment, Christgau delineated the ideologies of the country's most prominent rock critics. The article showed Christgau's polemical side in full flare.

Springsteen was relatively well known by mid-decade—"He'd been hailed as the New Dylan and had recorded two quirky albums," Mark Richardson writes—but

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at age 24 "he wasn't a star."¹⁴⁵ That would soon change—in part because *Born to Run* was an exhilarating, romantic album, and in part because Springsteen had some friends in journalism. The press push behind *Born to Run* rivaled that enjoyed by any artist since the Beatles, and even the fervor surrounding *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* seemed more like a product of dumbfounded glee than promotional ballyhoo. Christgau didn't think *Born to Run* undeserving—he awarded the album an A in Consumer Guide despite imploring Springsteen to learn "that operatic pomposity insults the Ronettes and that pseudo-tragic beautiful loser fatalism insults us all"¹⁴⁶—but he was struck by the chain of events following from critic Jon Landau's 1974 proclamation that Springsteen represented the "rock and roll future."¹⁴⁷ "On a night when I needed to feel young," Landau began his famous review of Springsteen's May 9, 1974 performance at the Harvard Square Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts,

[Bruce Springsteen] made me feel like I was hearing music for the very first time. When his two hour set ended I could only think, can anyone really be this good, can anyone say this much to me, can rock and roll speak with this kind of power and glory? And then I felt the sores on my thighs where I had been pounding my hands in time for the entire concert and knew that the answer was Yes.¹⁴⁸

http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/22261-born-to-run-30thanniversary-edition?artist_title=22261-born-to-run-30th-anniversary-edition, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹⁴⁵ Mark Richardson, "Bruce Springsteen: Born to Run: 30th Anniversary Edition," *Pitchfork Media*, November 18, 2005,

¹⁴⁶ Robert Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, Sep. 22, 1975, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv9-75.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

¹⁴⁷ Jon Landau, "The Harvard Square Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts Presents Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, 9th May 1974," *Real Paper*, May 22, 1974. ¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

A regular contributor to *Rolling Stone* and Boston alt-weekly *Real Paper*, and the author of one of the first book-length collections of rock journalism, 1972's *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, Landau wielded considerable influence. He made Christgau's short list of critics who comprised the official Rock-Critic Establishment. But he was still a journalist, a paid fan, someone who wrote about music but could never directly make it heard. And for Christgau that defined the crucial limit of rock criticism's reach: Criticism was print information, and music had to be heard. Radio and other audible media drove the promotional success or failure of rock music.

Or did they? "Something unique has been going on here," Christgau wrote of *Born to Run.* "Both the relative unanimity and the geographical spread of Springsteen's critical support were unusual but not unparalleled (cf. Randy Newman). What was new was the rapidity with which sales followed raves—the assent of the disc jockeys and ascent of the charts seemed to succeed each other almost instantaneously upon...the release of *Born to Run.*"¹⁴⁹ The sales *followed* the raves; criticism did have a tangible impact after all. Music had to be heard, yes, but *Born to Run* proved that fans looked to music writing for advice on how to allocate their leisure listening time.

It may seem surprising that all this came as a surprise to Christgau, who had seriously pursued the idea of criticism as a useful service, as a "guide," since the late '60s. But even Christgau doubted whether Consumer Guide had any measurable effect on sales; all he cared was that *anyone* would derive any value from his

¹⁴⁹ Christgau, "Yes, There is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But Is That Bad for Rock?)," *Village Voice*, Jan. 26, 1976, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/critics-76.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

findings, and he was more or less convinced that at least a few dozen people did. Christgau had never written a line like Landau's Bruce-is-future comment. But there was "no doubt" in Christgau's mind that Landau had precipitated Springsteen's ascent. "Amplified by a reported \$50,000 in Columbia promotion money, that lone risky, zealous review had journalistic reverberations that continue to this sentence.... It can justly be said to have engendered a star."¹⁵⁰ If that were true—that Landau had made a star—it was not something to be taken lightly. The Springsteen blitz represented an occasion to examine the privileges and responsibilities of being a rock critic. Landau's *Real Paper* review ran in May '74. By October of the same year, he had been recruited as Springsteen's co-producer (specifically to help Springsteen write "Born to Run"). Landau's name had jumped from byline to liner notes, prompting Christgau to question: How much artist contact is too much?

Many believed Springsteen was a corrective to all the AOR slush diluting the mid-'70s mainstream, a reaffirmation of the power of popular music as a cultural medium. These expectations carried an implicit longing for some prior time when rock and roll "mattered"—namely, the era that ended in June 1967. Springsteen may have triggered associations from the very beginning of rock and roll history, but as the Great White Hope he embodied notions about the revolutionary potential of rock music that had taken shape in the late '60s. Contradictorily, he did it by pretending the previous ten years had never happened. Among fans fed up with the desiccated mainstream, there was a sense that something had gone terribly wrong around the time of Monterey and the rise of white rock music. Springsteen responded by drawing

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

upon the gestures and attitudes of the pre-counterculture era: he wore blue jeans and motorcycle jackets and sang with a balladeer's melodramatic pomposity. His multi-racial band, meanwhile, made symbolic connections to rock's black roots. Indifferent to guitar solos and blues-derived structures, Springsteen tapped into the neglected R&B tradition. Whereas the rock audience from Monterey onward privileged a high-minded, collegiate sensibility, Springsteen countered with working-class ingenuousness and unpretentious passion—contributing thus to the sense that *Born to Run* restored rock to its youthful innocence. Springsteen appealed to listeners who, like Landau, wondered why "it wasn't good enough just to sing about cars, balling, dances, school and summertime blues" as opposed to, say, heroin or underground sex.¹⁵¹ It's no wonder many of Springsteen's most ardent supporters were men in their early thirties who had been among the first consumers of '50s rock 'n' roll, but who had missed the early '60s Top 40 acts Springsteen channeled formally.

While *Born to Run* enjoyed fervent support from critics nationwide, some complained of Springsteen's conservatism. Langdon Winner, a respected critic known for his contrarian streak, faced down the hype in his album review for—of all places—*Real Paper*: "[Springsteen] has gone to the finest pop schools. He respects his elders. He bears the finest credentials and upholds the highest standards. Like all dutiful epigone, he threatens to become the consummate bore."¹⁵² Winner summed up *Born to Run* by calling it "Springsteen's Nobel Prize Bid," a quip Christgau reprinted delightedly in "Rock-Critic Establishment." The very qualities that made Springsteen

¹⁵¹ Jim Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 322

¹⁵² Langdon Winner quoted in "Yes, There Is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But Is That Bad for Rock?), *Village Voice*

irresistible to some listeners played orthodox and boring to others, and this difference of opinion came to symbolize a much vaster ideological split among critics. For all the critics and fans who pined for this bygone state of affairs, just as many had divested themselves of romantic rock 'n' roll fantasies. Many who dug the music on *Born to Run* just fine wondered nevertheless if it was really worth rehashing an erstwhile paradigm.

Columbia Records undertook an aggressive marketing campaign that emphasized Springsteen's nostalgic qualities. With critics like Landau and Dave Marsh declaring history in the making, the label sought to reinforce the impression by booking Springsteen to perform small venues like New York's the Bottom Line, thus deliberately undersupplying ticket demands. Jim Miller summarizes the logic behind Springsteen's marketing thusly: "If it was declared loudly enough that a musician had wider cultural significance, it was feasible to manufacture, however briefly, at least a simulacrum of wider cultural significance, insofar as this could be measured by attention paid to a performer by the mass media."¹⁵³ What began as a whisper in Boston crescendoed through the pages of alternative weeklies and daily newspapers nationwide before reaching fever pitch with Springsteen gracing the covers of *Newsweek* and *Time* in the same week in late October 1975. The hype was so unstoppable that *Born to Run* managed to dodge the inevitable boomerang of a roaring media buildup. "The Springsteen backlash didn't touch its intended target commercially—the story had already taken root and the music was already being

¹⁵³ Miller, Flowers in the Dustbin, p. 324

heard."154

[MORE] magazine, a highbrow press journal, deployed a writer named Chris Welles to report on the Springsteen hype. Welles saw the blame resting squarely on the shoulders of rock criticism, a sham form that inherently betrayed its duty to serious culture by courting a wide audience. Though well reported and judicious, the piece confirmed Christgau's belief that "rock and roll, a genre now all the more déclassé for its identification with currently discredited '60s cultural phenomena, tends to bring out the worst in people."¹⁵⁵ Maybe the bloviating of the Springsteen cabal was silly and conservative, but enough outsiders like Welles had already attacked rock criticism without Christgau having to pile on. So while "Rock-Critic Establishment" acknowledged that rock criticism "invite[s] censure," allowing its ties to the music industry to develop into "restrictive bonds" and often succumbing to "faults of autodidacticism," Christgau felt obligated to support his colleagues and their work.¹⁵⁶ Despite the genre's flaws, he wrote, "I read on, as much from inclination as from duty, and find that a fair portion of what is bad, like some strains of 'bad' rock and roll, has the sloppy appeal of all open, democratic phenomena."¹⁵⁷

But something unusual had happened with Springsteen: his success was directly indicative of the power and influence of a particular, elite group of rock critics. *Born to Run* represented the first big victory of "the rock-critic

 ¹⁵⁴ Christgau, "Yes, There Is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But Is That Bad for Rock?)," *Village Voice* ¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

establishment."¹⁵⁸ The group included *New York Times* rock don John Rockwell, prolific freelancer-editor-columnist Paul Nelson, young *Creem*-founder and *Rolling Stone* review editor Dave Marsh, kingmaker Landau, and self-proclaimed Dean of American Rock Critics Robert Christgau. These writers shared (though "somewhat equivocally in Landau's case") a commitment to writing, a proportionate sense of power, and the belief that "what is called rock is America's most vital popular music."¹⁵⁹ Peers who equaled or surpassed the establishment members as practitioners of the form abounded: Greil Marcus, Jim Miller, and Lester Bangs all received props in the article. But Christgau's five constituted an establishment for three key reasons: New York residence, employment at influential publications, and social connection to one another.

Christgau felt Welle's *[MORE]* article elided the distinctions between rock critics and rock press. "There is a big difference," he wrote, "between an eloquent groupie like *Rolling Stone* puff king Ben Fong-Torres or a reporter doing her job like *Newsweek*'s Maureen Orth and a pop intellectual like Landau or Marsh."¹⁶⁰ The difference being that reporters tended to "accept the music and (if they are any good) question the artist," while critics, in Christgau's view, were more inclined to "[abstract] out from whatever's at ear to question the music itself."¹⁶¹ In a reversal of Welle's formulation, he likened critics to frustrated disc jockeys, whose "power impulse" was "not to make a star but to change the music."¹⁶² By this standard, was a

- ¹⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁶¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁶² Ibid.

crossover writer like Jon Landau a critic after all?

The fact that Christgau would attempt to identify such a structure reflects the unique seriousness with which he approached his job. Cadres congeal in any profession; few water cooler regulars, however, publish 5,000 word meditations on the differing ideologies within their set. But Christgau, feeling "movement-holdout uneasiness over the gathering of the establishment and its attendant comforts and privileges," thought himself duty-bound to check his power by exposing the skeletal frame of a group that evidently held some measure of control over the pop culture products consumed by mainstream Americans.¹⁶³ If he wrote "Rock-Critic Establishment" at the risk of betraying his friends, he didn't see himself perpetrating the rift. The Springsteen fanatics had already done so.

While Landau commonly gets the credit for breaking Springsteen, Dave Marsh was unrivalled among the singer's fans in rock criticism, and there's a strong chance *Born to Run* would not have been realized without Marsh's persistent chatter. Feeling Springsteen had occasioned "a fairly serious breach in [their] relationship," Christgau considered himself authorized to air Marsh's behind-the-scenes influence:

I think of Dave as Springsteen's most fervent and effective critic-fan. He has been: a notably vociferous advocate of Springsteen's ebullient, ambitious, but seriously flawed first album; one of the second albums quickest supporters; a good friend of Ron Oberman, Springsteen's staunchest ally at CBS when the second album failed to take off; the guy who took Landau to his first Springsteen concert; and an incorrigibly abundant source of inside dope (a lot of it from Landau, who was then producing *Born to Run*) in the year preceding the Bottom Line triumph.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Miller, telephone interview with author, Feb. 18, 2008

Christgau wrote "Rock-Critic Establishment" at a considerable risk to his popularity, which he further jeopardized by engaging Marsh and others in petty fights. Jim Miller remembers a party at Dave Marsh's house at which Christgau obliviously scattered cracker crumbs all over a new couch. Marsh scolded Christgau, and Christgau took offense: "He thought this was very bourgeois of Dave," who came from a working-class Detroit background. "Bob can be a very abrasive person," Miller says.¹⁶⁵

Christgau acknowledged the harshness of his diatribe, but stressed that there was simply no other way to get his point across. The rock-critic establishment, insofar as it existed, was no different than any other establishment: it needed to be identified and critiqued. As a member of this establishment, Christgau could participate in shaping its priorities. "I like to believe my own establishment is more open than others—above personalities, encouraging all good work."¹⁶⁶ The Springsteen fiasco, however, revealed abuses of power within the high echelons of the field. By Christgau's lights, the disappearance of Boston critics from *Rolling Stone* with the arrival of Marsh suggested not that Marsh was gravitating toward local writers—as establishmentarians are wont. Marsh's promotion coincided with the conspicuous disappearance of Bostonians such as *Phoenix* scribe Ken Emerson and Jon Landau's ex-wife Janet Maslin, leaving New York with a relative hegemony at *Rolling*

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Christgau, "Yes, There Is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But Is That Bad for Rock?)," *Village Voice*

Stone.¹⁶⁷ This worried Christgau, as did being the odd man out with regard to Springsteen.

Christgau, it might go without saying, did *not* see Springsteen as a corrective to the floundering mainstream, certainly not as the future of anything, and for Christgau and Marsh that was a "doctrinal disagreement."¹⁶⁸ Not for nothing had Christgau spent several years democratizing his enthusiasm with the somewhat obsessive Consumer Guide enterprise. He may have rated Dylan's The Basement *Tapes* (1st place in the Pazz & Jop poll), Patti Smith's *Horses* (2nd), and *Born to Run* (3rd) among the best records of 1975 in Consumer Guide, but he heard more of the rock and roll future in Brian Eno's *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* (A minus) and Pink Floyd's Wish You Were Here (A minus). Springsteen, meanwhile, was a histrionic star in the mold of Del Shannon. His awkward sense of vocal rhythm proved that Springsteen was "obviously attracted to rhythm-and-blues as teen rather than black music."¹⁶⁹ He embodied a hope and innocence that by the mid-'70s had gone missing from American life. These circumstances may have led Springsteen to come up with "the great album Phil Spector never made."¹⁷⁰ But Christgau would hear none of Landau's "future of music" claptrap:

[Springsteen's] rebel adolescent hero can be jubilant or mournful, defiant or driven to self-deceiving, but one thing is certain—he can always feel sorry for himself. This is a high grade of sentimental escapism, indulgence of a sort that is anything but wise. There is nothing tough or new in it. The future, rock and roll version included,

- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

is going to be tough, and it had better be new.¹⁷¹

Christgau wrapped "Rock-Critic Establishment" by revealing the story's "unpleasant edge": The apparent differences in how fans and establishment critics identified with *Born to Run*'s beautiful-loser romanticism. Hype-smashing pundits like Welles speculated that the critics reclaimed youth through their experience of Springsteen's music—an analysis Christgau thought stupid. In reality, it was not youth but rebellion that Marsh and Landau wished to preserve:

Like most people with a rock and roll jones, these are natural fighters, but they are also adults who live comfortably in the Bloomingdale belt; in some sense, they have won. Springsteen is a fighter, too; he has always played a winningly articulate kind of loser, and now he is rich as well as smart. And so my colleagues both thrill to a fellow winner and identify with his loser rebel persona, forgetting in the rock and roll moment how much the winner in them shares with what the fighter was fighting against.

Christgau thought it was different with Springsteen's fans. "What they need and desire—ominously, I think—is an artist who romanticizes and even celebrates a defeat that is a lot more likely for them than it is for any establishment, rock and roll version included."¹⁷² But Christgau was perhaps somewhat hasty to infer the makeup of Springsteen's audience from lyrical content alone. Although "in the years following *Born to Run*," Barry Schwartz writes, "Springsteen dedicated the thematic concerns of his music to the stories of those…who stayed behind, those who went to

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

war, those who chose the path-most-traveled," there was a substantial disconnect between Springsteen's characters and his adoring public.¹⁷³ The insightfulness and empathy of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), *The River* (1980), *Nebraska*

(1982), and *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984) drew an audience of white, college-educated AOR loyalists—people with personal or familial connections to those albums' stories of working-class romance, but who themselves likely inhabited a wealthier stratum. In strangely contradictory fashion, a large portion of Springsteen's audience would overlap with future members of the Reagan revolution. Despite his populist politics, Springsteen appealed to a conservative, anti-intellectual set who saw themselves as somehow more culturally authentic for their rejection of artistic sophistication. In 1975, Christgau no more foresaw the paradoxical co-optation of Springsteen's populist politics by jingoistic Republicans than he foresaw the coming shifts in government and economics. But he did see through the myth of Springsteen's cunning persona. Sentimental and artfully overblown, *Born to Run* squared perfectly with mainstream conventions. Far from a corrective to AOR, it was the apotheosis of it.

It would be simplistic to say that "Yes, There is a Rock-Critic Establishment" *called out* Landau and other prominent critics. But the article did, in its subtle way, draw lines. If Jon Landau can claim responsibility for making Bruce Springsteen a star, then Springsteen deserves credit for creating a rift in the mid-'70s critical community, which, according to Christgau, was once a "remarkably close-knit"

¹⁷³ Barry Schwartz, "The Diamond: Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band—Born in the USA," *Stylus Magazine*, May 08, 2007, <u>http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/diamond/bruce-springsteen-the-e-street-</u>

band-born-in-the-usa.htm, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

group.¹⁷⁴ As for the future of rock and roll, it would not be long before Springsteen skeptics got what they were ostensibly holding out for—something tough and new. Within three-and-a-half years of *Born to Run*'s release, Christgau would be writing about the "New Wave Hegemony." The double whammy of punk and new wave made the Springsteen hype of just a few years earlier seem like embarrassing childhood memories. Springsteen, of course, went on to enjoy fabulous commercial success. One might plausibly argue that he has Jon Landau and Dave Marsh to thank. "Not bad for an establishment," if you ask Robert Christgau.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Christgau, "Yes, There Is a Rock-Critic Establishment (But Is That Bad for Rock?)," *Village Voice* ¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

Christgau negotiated the mid-'70s doldrums not by pouncing on the first authenticseeming artist to come along and pronouncing him a savior, but by reflecting on the business of criticism while simultaneously intensifying his search for good product. His search culminated abruptly in 1977 with the ascent of the Sex Pistols and the ensuing explosions of punk rock and new wave. Formally, punk took its approach from a variety of predecessors, all with cult followings, who together constituted a sort of secret history of rock music. The Velvet Underground, MC5, Iggy Pop, and the Modern Lovers formed the basis of what Christgau saw as an essentially classdriven phenomenon:

Put young, relatively unskilled white musicians from an industrial city together with some electric guitars, grant them aesthetic acuteness by nature or nurture, and eventually it's bound to happen: rock and roll that differentiates itself from its (fundamentally black and rural) sources by taking on the crude, ugly, perhaps brutal facts of the (white and urban) prevailing culture, rather than hiding behind its bland façade.¹⁷⁶

Ripe with possibility and shot through with contradiction, punk appealed to critics. And unlike with Springsteen, the thematic concerns of *this* rock and roll future extended far beyond the emotional vicissitudes of love and failure, directly into the very real realms of mid-'70s British urban decay. Punk's polemical, community-building possibilities appealed to Christgau's extant

¹⁷⁶ Robert Christgau, "Avant-Punk: A Cult Explodes...and a Movement Is Born," *Village Voice*, Oct. 24, 1977, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/music/avantpunk-77.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

utopian humanism. Nor did it hurt that the music was hard and fast and catchy and disposed of technical preconceptions. "Punk cleans out the ears," Christgau wrote.¹⁷⁷

Before 1977, the Voice's year-end Pazz & Jop poll was an intimate, homespun operation that, while novel, did not reflect much evidence of any major movements in pop music. After 1977, it was still an intimate, homespun operation. But with the explosion of punk it had become apparent that a year-end canvassing of critics could actually help chart historical change. As with Consumer Guide, Christgau never dreamt of the poll serving as any kind of official barometer of critical sentiment, but readers started thinking of it that way. "A fellow member of the rock criticism establishment tells me that the poll which inspires my annual write-up might have a real shot at exposure in the newsweeklies—a chance to get some AM airplay and go pop—if it wasn't saddled with such a ridiculous name."¹⁷⁸ To which Christgau stridently responded: Ridiculous is the point. "Is this the most comprehensive yearend poll of rock critics conducted anywhere? You bet. Is it official? Of course not. How could it be?"¹⁷⁹ Just as Consumer Guide played at the convention of objective, disinterested critical evaluation without actually delivering the impossible, Pazz & Jop gave all the appearance of an official, comprehensive critics poll-the Final Word. In reality, it only represented the aesthetic preferences of an infinitesimal sliver of all the listeners who thought about rock critically. It was by no means official. But

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

 ¹⁷⁸ Robert Christgau, "Pazz & Joppers Dig Pistols—What Else Is New?" *Village Voice*, Jan. 23, 1978, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/pnj/pj77.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

what did that matter if readers treated it as such?

To say *Village Voice* readers literally took the Pazz & Jop judgments as irrefutable insults *Village Voice* readers' intelligence. But Christgau spoke the truth: It was the most comprehensive year-end critics poll, and that counted for something. It gathered rock's best intellectuals and most affable gatekeepers at a time when intellectuals and gatekeepers were looked to for orientation. Pazz & Jop founded the institution of year-end critics polls, which have become obligatory for every publication that covers pop music, including one-person blogs. Today, the website Metacritic.com, a review "aggregator" that calculates a numerical mean of critical opinion for every major album release, compiles its own year-end list of more than 50 year-end critic top ten lists. Although Metacritic arranges the lists in alphabetical order, Pazz & Jop runs out of order at the top of the feature, a sort of overseeing patriarch.

Sixty-eight critics participated in the 1977 poll, up from 66 the previous year. In his companion essay, Christgau trumpeted the fact that he did not personally know 25 of the critics who submitted ballots. He apologized for the flaws in his selection method (a common source of anxiety), which leaned on the advice of personal contacts such as editors and publicists—"a certain in-groupishness is…inevitable"—and expressed regret over the lack of black music, country music, and critics of black and country music.¹⁸⁰ Post-Springsteen, post-"Yes, There Is a Rock-Critic Establishment," Christgau was also highly conscious of New York domination, but in 1977 Pazz & Jop the scales still tipped heavily in favor of Gotham.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Seven years earlier, the first Pazz & Jop had counted 84 ballots—only 39 of which, however, came from "what by some stretch of term might be called legitimate critics."¹⁸¹ Three years later, upon returning to the *Voice* from *Newsday* and reinstituting Pazz & Jop, Christgau implemented an invitation-only policy, restricting the voting pool to 25. Still, this method had its flaws. "If it ever came down to making this all fair and official," he wrote in 1977, "I'd be in a quandry [sic], because there's lots of people who write about records who don't belong in this poll."¹⁸² If he inadvertently overlooked dozens of serious writers whose credentials cut muster, he also guessed that his "arbitrary haphazardness" had omitted hundreds of would-be party-crashing charlatans.¹⁸³ "I apologize to the workers, request the dunderheads to leave me alone, remind everyone that this is still the weird old *Village Voice*, and insist that the Pazz & Jop Critics' Poll actually represents what the best rock critics think."¹⁸⁴ What the *best* rock critics thought—comprehensive year-end survey or not, expertise still mattered. As the title cheekily acknowledged, many of Pazz & Jop's participants were too good to be doing what they were doing. But in mocking the false elitism of art institutions, the poll expressed its own kind of elitism. The trouble for Christgau was inoculating the legitimate elitism of critics who were devoted to the artistry of popular music from the false elite of critics who worked their influence through connections and establishment positions.

The dual, paradoxical effect of Pazz & Jop was similar to that of Consumer Guide. Though through the advent of an indifferent and highly arbitrary system it

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

appeared to self-sabotage the legitimacy of its critical objective, the poll actually opened up a ground for talking seriously about art, while simultaneously providing a reliable, low-effort mechanism for consumers to find quality product. Like Consumer Guide, it exposed the thin line between democratic populism and market populism, thereby enabling an honest discussion of the material at hand. Divided into four components—Christgau's essay, his "Dean's List" of his 30 favorite records of the year, the critics poll, and a collage of comments from individual balloters—the annual Pazz & Jop issue was a veritable feast. And although Christgau oversaw the proceedings, his essay and personal list were never meant to supersede the main survey. Rather, he used the space to make sense of the poll's results: infer trends, critique biases, assess the health of the music industry.

The poll only necessitated a meaningful response insofar as its results were meaningful. Before 1977, Christgau wrote short, number-crunching essays that offered lots of enlightened rehash but few broad insights; the essays didn't attempt to take account of cultural watersheds because there were none. If nothing seemed tremendously shocking or significant about the winners of '71 (The Who's *Who's Next*), '74 (Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*), and '76 (Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*), that's because, while great albums all, none of them marked a cultural upheaval. Pazz & Jop voters appreciated musicians who explored the possibilities of the album form, making sophisticated art out of pop materials. But many critics simultaneously saw long, self-conscious albums as a threat to the spirit of rock and roll and to their bohemian self-image. *Who's Next* is a quintessential rock album, but in a more universal sense it's also middlebrow art. The Sex Pistols provoked a

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complicated reaction: they didn't directly take on middlebrow rock, just made those albums seem quaint and genteel. The 1977 victory for *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* came amid a hype spree unlike any since *Born to Run*. The Sex Pistols stood conventional critical values on their head, yet Pazz & Jop voters (Christgau included) loved them. Clearly the Sex Pistols' victory owed to something greater than a bunch of critics concurrently deciding they really liked the sounds the band made. Here was a situation that called for a strong, substantive response.

Just as Marsh and Landau had written effusively about *Born to Run* and Springsteen's cancer-curing live show, Christgau could barely stifle his squeals when it came to punk rock. "I haven't been this excited about rock and roll in at least 10 years," he wrote.¹⁸⁵ He dug British punk's reform rage the way Marsh and Landau had dug Springsteen's vicarious rebel experience Like *Born to Run, Never Mind the Bollocks* occasioned a renewal effort that confronted rock's ongoing problems, especially its troubled relationship to its black roots, but failed to overcome them. Christgau chose punk's ironic avantgardism over Springsteen's masterful middlebrow sentimentality. All too aware of hype's backspin, however, Christgau tried to contain the punk phenomenon before it overextended itself. He titled the '77 Pazz & Jop essay, "Pazz & Joppers Dig Pistols—What Else Is New?" and confessed to rooting for Fleetwood Mac, whose *Rumours* opened 1978 at the top of trade pub *Record World*'s album chart for a record 32nd straight week.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Christgau, "Avant-Punk: A Cult Explodes...And a Movement Is Born," Village Voice

¹⁸⁶ Christgau, "Pazz & Joppers Dig Pistols—What Else Is New?" Village Voice

Rumours, Christgau argued, would have made a "better" Pazz & Jop winner. Partly this was just ironic contrarianism. But in a certain sense, a Fleetwood Mac victory would have spoken more favorably to rock critics by convincing "a few skeptics that all this punk stuff is not, to use the popular expression, hype."¹⁸⁷ How could punk affect real social upheaval if it acquiesced to mainstream credentials? Christgau also foresaw a certain personal danger in a punk putsch. With *Born to Run*, criticism established its effect on sales, thereby temporarily reinsuring "the all-toocomfortable symbiosis between rock journalism and the record industry."¹⁸⁸ The fact that punk threatened to disrupt press-industry symbiosis suited the genre's anticapitalist imperatives. But while Christgau whole-heartedlyembraced those imperatives, he also wondered if there wasn't some sort of pragmatic necessity to industry contamination:

Critics are a source of some small status, a perquisite of the easy life that is treasured in this traditionally disreputable biz, and have helped to support and eventually break more than a few unusual but tasty acts, Fleetwood Mac among them. If punk should prove modestly profitable, as seems quite possible, then the symbiosis will continue undisturbed. But if it should prove unprofitable and yet refuse to roll over and play dead, and if critics should continue to support it—a scenario that also seems plausible—then I wouldn't be surprised if some big companies begin to take the same neglectful attitude toward low-rent journalistic recalcitrants as a label like Motown, which has been notoriously stingy with review copies and information for as long as I've been writing about rock and roll.¹⁸⁹

187 Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

Although he has claimed to never prophesy, Christgau speculated freely on the direction of punk. Perhaps that's because he really rooted for punk to succeed—that is, for it to reach a vast audience. "English punk turns everyone who likes it into a hapless fan," he wrote.¹⁹⁰ Since punk was de facto protest music, many listeners saw themselves as partisans as much as fans. This excited Christgau, who felt that the greatest thing pop music could do was build coalitions. By early 1978 Christgau had already written at length about the historical roots and contradictory politics of the movement, but Pazz & Jop occasioned a special kind of analysis. Christgau's job was to decipher the critical reaction to the avatars of a new phenomenon. The fact that critical reaction was growing more distinct from fan reaction made this a delicate task.

Juxtaposing Christgau's 1977 and 1978 Pazz & Jop essays provides an object lesson in the volatility of critical consensus. Christgau used the term "New Wave" once in the '77 essay, dismissing Elvis Costello as "New Wave' for people with good taste."¹⁹¹ He claimed to prefer using "punk"—as if the concepts were interchangeable—precisely because it was "so hackneyed, inexact and déclassé."¹⁹² One year later, Christgau would title his '78 essay, "New Wave Hegemony and the Bebop Question," and begin the piece by saying, "punk, I will never forget you."¹⁹³ Not only had Costello's sophomore album *This Year's Model* taken top honors, it won in an unprecedented landslide. *This Year's Model* firmly established that

¹⁹⁰ Christgau, "Avant-Punk: A Cult Explodes...And a Movement Is Born," *Village Voice*

 ¹⁹¹ Christgau, "Pazz & Joppers Dig Pistols—What Else Is New?" Village Voice
 ¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Christgau, "New Wave Hegemony and the Bebop Question," *Village Voice*, Jan.

^{22, 1979,} http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/pnj/pj78.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

Costello's music was not punk (as implied by his rougher-hewn debut album) but something altogether different. "This is not punk rock," Christgau began his A Consumer Guide review. The name was new wave, and Costello represented the first triumph of a new group of artists inspired by, but hardly reducible to, the innovations of punk rock.

"New Wave Hegemony" exceeded Christgau's '77 Pazz & Jop essay by more than 3,000 words—and understandably so, because the year packed more new developments than any in the poll's history. With '77 finishers Steely Dan, Fleetwood Mac, Randy Newman, and Jackson Browne all mute in '78, new wave bands stepped in to snag 16 of the poll's 30 slots. The profusion of new sounds was overwhelming. New wave seemed to embody all the latent energy of rock's mid-'70s fallow period. Its breakthrough was finding new uses for the long-lost rock and roll virtues of catchiness, concision, and rhythmic insistence. In the best new wave, Christgau heard the wit and temper of Elvis, Chuck Berry, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, but the genre avoided nostalgia. "For critics who have deplored rock's increasing pomposity and blandness, this is a vindication. Rock and roll is our passion, and suddenly there's more of the real stuff than at any time since rock criticism began."¹⁹⁴

New wave's impact on critical opinion, however, was disproportionate to its impact on sales. Though ineligible for the poll because it was released in 1977, the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack was the best-selling album of 1978. It's almost certain more people—over 30 million—bought *Saturday Night Fever* than all the year's new-wave releases combined. The biggest commercial success among the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

new-wave records that placed, meanwhile, was Patti Smith's *Easter*, an album that undershot measly gold certification. Next to such sales behemoths as *Saturday Night Fever*, Fleetwood Mac's unstoppable *Rumours*, or even perennial Pazz & Jop finishers Steely Dan, the commercial status of the poll's new wave picks looked pathetic. If new wave rejuvenated the formal template of rock music, the fact that new wave artists weren't selling records suggested that rock music had reached the end of its run as the dominant pop genre. Making matters worse, the anticommercial agitprop of a small but vocal anti-disco contingent embarrassed Christgau.

In one sense, new wave signaled the official death of rock as monoculture, the point at which rock and pop could no longer be conflated. This was a nightmarecome-true for anyone who spent the early '70s worrying about the fragmentation of the rock audience. But while many critics developed a kind of "cosmic cynicism" as it became apparent rock would never regain its old cultural monopoly, Christgau felt that the new wave monomaniacs threatened to ghettoize rock music.¹⁹⁵ Therein lied the danger of the new wave "hegemony." But despite the obvious problems with the idea that new wave was some kind of panacea, it was clearly the most palatable option, and new wavers were always more open-minded and enlightened than the Disco Sucks crowd, which Christgau skewered:

These assholes are such fanatics that they seize upon the first hint of synthesized percussion or rhythmic strings or chukka-chukka guitar—hell, the first *lilt*—as proof that anybody from Bowie to Poco has 'gone disco'.... They turn the fatuity, monotonousness, and wimpoid tendencies of the worst (or most monofunctional) disco into an excuse for rejecting all contemporary black music except perhaps reggae.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

Not only did Christgau consider the disco-haters bad listeners (some disco records, after all, were "wonderful rock and roll"), he found their anti-commercialism crass and myopic.¹⁹⁷ But while he sought to discourage such thinking, Christgau did not mean to suggest that Pazz & Joppers *ought* to love pop music, or to insist, like he had in 1969, on the unwitting benevolence of the mainstream distribution system. He remained "a gleefully defiant rock and roll fan," and he wanted, above all, to nurture smart rock and roll listeners.¹⁹⁸ The best path to enlightenment, he reasoned, was open-mindedness. "Rock and roll has always been eclectic, not to say cannibalistic, and in the bleak mid-'70s, all but its most dogged (dog-eared?) critical adherents learned to translate that eclecticism into enjoyment of other kinds of music."¹⁹⁹ New wave showed rock's eclecticist side in full flower, and the worst thing critics could do was use the movement as an excuse to reify rock *qua* rock all over again. That would be a big waste of a creative explosion.

Pazz & Jop hegemony aside, Christgau proclaimed 1978 a great year for music—"the best ever in hard rock."²⁰⁰ Even Dave Marsh, a new wave skeptic, found Elvis Costello irresistible, while aesthetic conservatives generally approved of "'twixt wave-and-stream bands like the Cars and Cheap Trick."²⁰¹ Though the genre was a sales slum, Christgau remained sanguine. The Talking Heads did, after all, sell 200,000 records, and bands with less-than-favorable commercial prospects were

- ¹⁹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁰ Ibid.
- ²⁰¹ Ibid.

finding ways to be heard. "This new kind of rock and roll is going to be around for awhile," he predicted.²⁰²

Christgau's patience had paid off. Three years removed from Born to Run, Bruce Springsteen, once the future of rock and roll, was now "a likable conservative—the vital center, your favorite uncle."²⁰³ His *Darkness at the Edge of* Town nabbed sixth place in the poll on the strength of reputation and "mature, fullbodied philosophical insight," not fresh-blooded novelty.²⁰⁴ Now confronted with an embarrassment of riches, Christgau could only marvel at how drastically his outlook had shifted. "If someone had told me five years ago that I was destined for cultism, I would have scoffed, or cried. Rock and roll was pop music, that was my line-it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that cultural resonance."²⁰⁵ The idea that a broadbased audience was integral to rock quality held strong in the aesthetic economy of critics like Marsh, but Christgau had changed his tune. "The rock that has become America's popular music is rotten from Olivia Newton-John all the way to Kansas," he wrote.²⁰⁶ No one expected new wave to flood the mainstream—that would be a bit like a third-party presidency—but Christgau predicted that the genre's innovations would seep through and proliferate through various hybrid forms.

Structurally, Christgau likened new wave's situation to bebop's in the 1950s. In the late '40s, as attention shifted from bandleaders to vocalists, swing "began to evolve into the fatuous pop music of Mitch Miller and Doris Day," opening ground

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

 ²⁰⁴ Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide." *Village Voice*, June 26, 1978, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv6-78.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ²⁰⁵ Christgau, "New Wave Hegemony and the Bebop Question," *Village Voice* ²⁰⁶ Ibid.

for bebop's rhythmic and harmonic innovations to pervade jazz music.²⁰⁷ Though bebop never became a massive popular success, its rebellion helped launch a critique of a moribund mainstream. Formally bebop's obverse (stiff rather than swung, primitive rather than sophisticated), new wave nevertheless paralleled the '50s jazz vanguard in its "hostile bohemian stance" and its "disquieting way of coming on both wild (hot) and detached (cool)."²⁰⁸ Both movements drew aesthetic power from the very factors that limited their audiences.

Christgau closed "New Wave Hegemony" by imagining a new wave-disco fusion: If bebop mingled with r&b, producing hybrid forms like hard bop and soul jazz, what stopped new wave, an analogous phenomenon, from eventually finding common ground with disco? A vocal minority of rock critics may have dismissed disco as commercially sanctioned numbskullery utterly devoid of aesthetic worth, but few critics yet recognized the music industry as an unequivocally evil monolith at "the root of all banality."²⁰⁹ While new wave partisans rated cultish rock favorites over major rock hits for personal, political, and personal-political (as well as aesthetic) reasons, both products inhabited the same critical frame of reference. "Young CBGBites may not have thought *Rumours* was a better album than *Talking Heads 77*, or *Some Girls* a better album than *This Year's Model*, but at least they recognized all four as competing aesthetic objects—accepted the terms of the

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

- ²⁰⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁹ Ibid.

comparison.²¹⁰ New wave-disco was hardly a preposterous thing to postulate. But rather than constituting a solution, Christgau's prediction merely suggested the depth of the problem: bebop led to hard bop, but it couldn't help jazz regain the popular status it held in the heyday of the swing era. Christgau had become a rock critic in part to celebrate and nurture the dream of a popular art that would overcome the institutional divisions of twentieth-century culture, but by clarifying the big problems and bringing the music world to a state of crisis, punk and new wave actually revealed the strong likelihood that elite taste and mass popularity would become totally disconnected.

In his companion piece to the inaugural Pazz & Jop in 1971, Christgau had written, "I am reluctant to enforce the tenuous distinction between fan and critic."²¹¹ Such was his reluctance that he invited *Voice* readers to cast their own ballots. The poll revealed differences in taste between the nearly equal groups of participants (45 "fans," 39 "critics"), but these differences resulted primarily from critics' privileged proclivity to "[praise] albums no one else likes or has even heard of to establish what...cool [people they] are."²¹² Interest, arrogance, and writing ability: Christgau's three requisite skills of a rock critic were common enough among the general population, so why not include fans?

By 1978, the critic-fan distinction had grown much firmer. This process

²¹⁰ Christgau, "Postpunk-Postdisco Fusion," *Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg80/in_post.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

²¹¹ Christgau, "Pazz & Jop Critics Poll: What Does It All Mean?" *Village Voice*, Feb. 17, 1972, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/pnj/pj71.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008 ²¹² Ibid.

would continue throughout the 1980s as record companies opted out of "marginal" music, grew stingier with artist access, and further consolidated the means of production. As a result, the paradox of Pazz & Jop would intensify. The poll remained what it began: an intellectual critics' gathering with educational utility (not to mention entertainment value). But as subcultural acclaim began to assume a larger chunk of what constituted cultural importance, it became harder to identify the poll's audience. Chances were that few readers would recognize all the names in a mid-'80s top twenty, let alone be familiar with all the music. The increasing fragmentation of the market and the emergence of a farm system of independent labels, meanwhile, paralleled the ascent of the multiplatinum megastar. This in turn posed a strategic dilemma for Pazz & Jop voters. There were simultaneously more critically sanctioned small-time artists and fewer nationally recognizable pop icons. Members of the latter category were often too big to ignore, while many members of the former category were too small to pay any heed. Rate the little guy, and you risked seeming obscurantist; vote based on cultural significance (meaning popularity), and you could be accused of philistinism or, worse, of aiding the international corporate consolidation of the music industry.

While punk and new wave succored critics dismayed by the deterioration of the rock mainstream, the genres' co-emergence also marked the beginning of a contentious period for rock criticism. Despite the profusion of intelligent and surprising music, rock could do nothing to regain the status it once held as a central feature of American culture. Not only was it not monoculture, its best chance for life was as subculture. This situation would not sit well with everyone.

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CHAPTER 6

In the 1970s, rock criticism was relatively simple business. For the most part, critics had all the resources they needed to do their job: Artist access, creative latitude, and a proliferation of outlets. The rock universe was large, but not incomprehensibly so. Until late in the decade, the mainstream belonged to white, rock-identified artists. One could conceal one's aesthetic limitations easily enough. Then, as suddenly as punk exploded out of working-class England, the disco bubble burst and the recording industry entered a prolonged slump. Some may have hoped to see rock use this shift to reclaim its mainstream hegemony, but it was not meant to be: Punk and new wave were too abrasive and too entrenched in underground subcultural economies to ever make the truly monstrous cultural splash record labels came to expect from their artists. During the first half of the '80s, many of the industry's longstanding business assumptions came under question. The subsequent redirection of venture capital would profoundly alter the landscape of pop music and, consequently, the practice of music criticism.

The industry's struggles prompted doomsaying trend pieces that foretold extreme changes. In *Newsweek*, Jim Miller wondered, doubtfully, if rock could "reclaim its leading role in defining the frontiers of America's popular culture."²¹³ Popular theories tagged the growing popularity of video games, an early-decade recession, and the emergence of cassette recording as reasons for the slump. But no

²¹³ Jim Miller quoted in Christgau, Robert, "Rock 'n' Roller Coaster: The Music Biz on a Joyride," *Village Voice*, Feb. 7, 1984, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/musicbiz-84.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

one could completely account for the sales lapse. The industry generally failed to see how its decisions might be connected to its struggles, claiming instead that home tapers were entirely responsible. Critics couldn't produce a satisfying explanation when asked—which was rarely, as newspapers and magazines began squeezing rock critics' column inches. "Patternlessness doesn't have to mean there's no significant action," Christgau wrote. "But it can be a bitch to figure out." Such a bitch, in fact, that many critics drifted away from rock criticism out of exasperation. Miller, a prominent first generation critic who edited *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll* (1976), found his *Newsweek* assignments increasingly vapid. "It got to be nutty. They wanted you to do profiles on Boy George, who's essentially a moronic drag queen, who's a heroin addict. And you're supposed to do 1,000 words and this is supposed to be of cultural significance?"²¹⁴

Rock critics faced the same problem fans did: It was no longer intuitively obvious what was significant or meaningful about rock music. Within rock, increasingly specific subgenres proliferated. Unlike in 1955 or 1965 or even 1975, a critic could not call something "rock 'n' roll" or "rock" and be confident his audience would understand what that meant. British synth-pop or "new pop," which added the technological innovations of synthesizers and other electronic components to David Bowie's androgynous sexuality and worship of surfaces, took rock possibilities further afield. In Britain, where new pop enjoyed a brief but intense commercial life, artifice replaced authenticity as the primary concern of popular music criticism. "In the late sixties," Simon Frith wrote, "'rock' had been established as the praise-word,

²¹⁴ Miller, telephone interview with author, Feb. 18, 2008

distinguishing serious or powerful music from 'commercial rubbish' and formula sounds. Now, 'pop' became the term of praise, a way of distinguishing sharp and clever sounds from 'rockist rubbish' and formula flab."²¹⁵ In the United States, the artifice/authenticity debate revolved around the tension between the developing culture of independent—or "indie"—labels and the rise of the MTV superstar (record companies devoted a greater percentage of their investment capital to fewer artists, hoping to cash in on mega-selling, visually commodifiable acts like Michael Jackson or Prince). Complicating matters for critics in both countries was the fact that, in an increasingly polarized critical milieu, splitting allegiances between pop and rock, commercial and non-commercial, over- and underground, endangered one's credibility.

In the first half of the '80s, Christgau wrote just a handful on non-Consumer Guide articles: Some artists, like Neil Young, warranted a close look outside the context of the Guide, and occasionally a book came along that set Christgau's antennas atwitter—usually rock-related biographies or studies having to do with the cultural legacy of the '60s. Most critics with column space and latitude feel obliged to offer comment on prevailing trends, but Christgau didn't produce a piece on the industry slowdown right away. Perhaps this is because he was so committed to editing. Or perhaps the Consumer Guide consumed too much of Christgau's time: At an average of 40 minutes, the 3,005 albums Christgau reviewed in the 1980s would work out to over 2,000 hours of music. If (as he claims) Christgau hears most albums two or three times before reviewing, and plays countless other review candidates once

²¹⁵ Simon Frith, *Music For Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 4

fully through before deeming those albums unworthy of column space, that's almost a full year of listening per decade before he even starts writing.

But as a public intellectual, Christgau couldn't let the industry's turmoil pass without offering some perspective. So he published "The Rock 'n' Roller Coaster: The Music Biz on a Joyride," a five-part, 10,000-plus word State of the Union address in which he confidently and systematically debunked most of the flailing theories about the floundering music business, only to eventually confess, "I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about."²¹⁶ By the time the piece ran in the *Village Voice* in early 1984, the music biz had already rebounded somewhat from the postdisco contraction, but the economic turbulence had "changed the music utterly."²¹⁷ Christgau took the opportunity to try to make sense of pop music's precarious place in capitalism. The resulting investigation was audacious not just for its length, but also for the frank scrutiny to which it subjected the economic mechanisms of an industry whose advertisements filled the pages of *Voice*.

While Christgau had scoffed at all the previous rock-is-dead rumors, his optimism, he admitted, grouped him with "those willing to suspend their disbelief in eternal youth."²¹⁸ But the latest round of speculation had left Christgau feeling blue. "Teen rebellion and electric guitars aren't looking particularly eternal themselves these days," he wrote.²¹⁹ The numbers couldn't be disputed. In 1982, industry-wide layoffs and a rumored sales dip of 15 percent prompted scrutiny from all arms of the

²¹⁶ Christgau, "The Rock 'n' Roller Coaster: The Music Biz on a Joyride," *Village Voice*

²¹⁷ Christgau, "It's Barely Rock and Roll, But I Like It," *Village Voice*, May 18, 1982, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bkrev/frith.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

²¹⁸ Christgau, "The Rock 'n' Roller Coaster: Music Biz on a Joyride," *Village Voice* ²¹⁹ Ibid.

press.

Christgau was skeptical, however, of many of the theories being spun in efforts to explain things. "If leisure activities cut into each other than mechanistically," he wrote, "the sports equipment boom of the late '70s would have done music in."²²⁰ So scratch video games. Although the downswing coincided with a near-depression in the early Reagan years, "the biz earned its recession-proof rep by surviving several recessions, and it got beat in the latest one for the most fanciful reason of all: quality."²²¹ So scratch recession. Cassettes, meanwhile, undoubtedly accounted for some of the industry's losses—one Warners survey put the damage at \$350 million dollars. But the home-taper contingent counted for some of the industry's best regular customers. So scratch melodramatic reports that every blank tape bought equaled one record not sold—which, based on the hours of blank cassettes sold in 1982, would mean a loss of over 10 million units.

A more likely culprit, many executives thought, was radio. "This was a traditional tack, but a persuasive one, because the long-standing symbiotic rivalry between the two industries is rooted in a real structural incompatibility—bizzers are after your money while broadcasters only want your minutes."²²² But here the exact impact was hard to measure. Radio had undoubtedly cultivated a passive audience—it made money by keeping people "locked in," which often meant providing a pleasant, inoffensive background noise against which one could zone out—but the industry wanted the same. This audience, "homogenized and fractionalized all at once," might

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

have grown so passive as to become uninterested in music, but radio ratings could never be used to measure something so specific as, say, consumer (un)willingness to spend money on records.²²³

Either way, times were lean. As in any recession, those at the bottom of the ladder absorbed the most damage initially. "The industry's doom merchants were quick to point out that the first casualty of this lost revenue was venture capital—money for new and marginal talent."²²⁴ This was troubling, but not altogether surprising. "Marginal talent"—underground acts that survived based on their ability to engage and inspire a small, discriminating fanbase—did not fit into a business plan that valued passivity. "Long ago [the industry] showed itself quite willing to jettison actively discerning record buyers whenever their taste interfered with the development of a more profitable if less spontaneously musical interest group we'll designate the suckers."²²⁵ The resulting record-buying market gobbled up the industry's flashiest, most ubiquitous products but balked at most else.

Those flashy, ubiquitous products got flashier and more ubiquitous with the arrival of MTV. And the arrival couldn't have come sooner for the ailing industry. "Currently in 18.4 million well-heeled, leisure-conscious homes," Christgau wrote, "MTV sparked the recovery if anything did. For all its infinite venality, MTV provided a breath of proverbial fresh air for the rock audience and a shot in the proverbial arm for record sales."²²⁶ In the early days, MTV broadcast primarily white, British, new wave-derived acts—in Christgau's words, "appearance-obsessed art-

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

school types who were eager to stake some of their Eurodollars on the stateside profits rock and rollers dream of.²²⁷ The network resisted black music until it hurt, refusing even to air Michael Jackson videos before a combination of CBS pressure and Jackson's astronomical commercial potential persuaded them otherwise. Given an unmistakable boost by the \$200,000 music video for "Beat It," which quickly became the network's most popular video ever, Jackson's album *Thriller* catapulted to unprecedented commercial success. By the time Christgau published "Rock and Roller Coaster," the album had sold over 20 million copies.

MTV-Jackson represented a new paradigm in pop music. Unlike radio, televisual broadcasting was structurally compatible with the record industry. "Because visual information is so specific that people quickly get bored with it, the channel craves novelty by nature."²²⁸ If only ultimately by accelerating consumption cycles, MTV took care of listener apathy. Here was something music fans could get excited about. Along with MTV, younger and less traditional music industry employees pinned their hopes on "new music"—basically a catchall term for anything that wasn't album-oriented rock (AOR). Lifted from a specific source—the downtown minimalist avant-garde scene—the term "new music" indicated an eager wish on the part of its believers "to deny antecedents which are in fact inescapable."²²⁹ No one knew what sounds it actually described, but the *Wall Street Journal* hilariously called it "'futuristic technopop' and a blend of 'a blend of rock,

²²⁷ Ibid.

- ²²⁸ Ibid.
- ²²⁹ Ibid.

soul, and reggae' all in the same sentence.²³⁰ Christgau, for his part, defined new music as "all music deriving primarily from the energy and influence of the Ramones and the Sex Pistols.²³¹ A true enough statement, sociologically, but meant in jest nevertheless.

Christgau argued that, in all its sweeping vagueness, new music subsumed too much to be meaningful, even if it couldn't subsume Michael Jackson, whose success owed to an array of factors more complicated than the industry simply "coming to terms with…progress" and embracing new music.²³² But both new music and *Thriller* relied on and helped further precipitate a breach of racial boundaries in pop music. And the success of that breach would prefigure MTV's brand image as an edgy, cross-racial platform. "The thing is," Christgau wrote:

Thriller couldn't have happened in a vacuum. Insofar as new music is basically Anglodisco, its rapprochement between the white rock audience and dance music worked to the enormous advantage of *Thriller*: for all its whiteskin provincialism, its defanged funk and silly soul, the world of new music is somewhat more open to black artists than the world of AOR. (What isn't?) Certainly neither Prince nor Eddy Grant could have crossed over without first proving themselves in the white dance clubs, and while Michael Jackson obviously didn't need this more hospitable atmosphere—not with Paul McCartney and Eddie Van Halen on his side—he just as obviously benefited from it.

MTV, which despite its early programmatic racism (it refused to play rap videos until 1989) had no set genre-specific format as such, evinced Jackson's enormous crossover potential. Soon enough, *Thriller* was being played on all types of radio

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

stations. With his fingers firmly crossed, Christgau ventured that MTV would never be "as conservative a cultural force as AOR."²³³ If, by conservative, he meant sonically provincial and racially homogenous, he was more or less right. While one still might not call MTV's programming racially *harmonious*, the channel helped articulate the visual vocabulary of rap (as opposed to hip-hop) and thus hastened the great racial shift in American pop music.

The lesson the industry pulled from *Thriller* had less to do with race, however, than with distribution of capital. *Thriller* fulfilled "the blockbuster fantasy that [had] possessed the industry since Saturday Night Fever."234 Many executives believed it was the key to the recovery. Going forward, the search for similar blockbusters would suck up more and more of the industry's resources. Simon Frith describes the experience of shopping for records during Christmastime in 1986, just after the release of Bruce Springsteen's five-album box set *Live*: "Walking through London from Tottenham Court Road down Oxford Street to Piccadilly in early December, passing the three symbols of corporate rock—the Virgin, HMV and Tower superstores—each claiming to be the biggest record shop in the world, I could only see Springsteen boxes, piled high by the cash desks, the *safest* stock of the season."235 Merchandise does not come to monopolize superstore window displays by accident. That *Live* would not have dominated storefronts without a massive promotional push goes without saying; what's remarkable is that the record stores agreed that advertising massive quantities of one item would bring in more customers than would

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Frith, Music For Pleasure, p. 94

showing a range of popular merchandise. But such was the strategy labels, distributors, and retailers went to after the early '80s.

While *Thriller*'s success reconciled rock and dance audiences, Christgau cautioned against reading it as a watershed for race relations. "Sure it was *Thriller*'s year, but Afrika Bambaataa and Blood Ulmer and the perennial George Clinton did great work in 1983 too, and none of them has cracked MTV quite yet."²³⁶ The industry valued Michael Jackson as the consummate "horizontal" artist—that is, he integrated a range of demographics. Album-oriented rock, on the other hand, was considered "vertical," and thus outmoded. Particularly strong with white teenagers, AOR had a narrow base of loyal fans that tended to spend its money exclusively in one section of the record store. The salability of Top 40, meanwhile, relied on a broad base of dabblers. All of which was fine and good as far as Christgau was concerned, except for one problem:

Top 40 doesn't command the consensus it did in the middle '60s. And it doesn't command the excitement either. It can't because that excitement wasn't as simple function of cultural reach or musical quality: it was bound up in a sense of expansive social possibility, with rock and roll more reflection than source. For the moment, that sense of imminent possibility is effectively dead.²³⁷

Former Beatlemaniacs who trumpeted a return to the halcyon days of the '60s monoculture had another thing coming. Hit radio no longer offered the same range. The format brought fewer and fewer surprises, and more rock listeners tuned out

 ²³⁶ Christgau, "The Rock 'n' Roller Coaster: Music Biz on a Joyride," *Village Voice* ²³⁷ Ibid.

entirely. Radio being radio, programmers pursued a risk-averse strategy. And while not to make a highly dubious general statement about quality, one must consider that the number one song in America when Christgau published "Rock and Roller Coaster" was "Karma Chameleon" by Culture Club. In February of 1964, it was the Beatles' "I Wanna Hold Your Hand." A further comparison of the years pits Yes, Kenny Loggins, and "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" against Bobby Vinton, Roy Orbison, and "The House of the Rising Sun." Which is simply to shed light on the potential mindset of experienced rock critics at this juncture.

The '80s were when Top 40 radio—the original basis of the American musical monoculture—surrendered what little of its relevance remained. Christgau lamented its fall. If nothing else, a monoculture provides a ground that permits people to speak to each other about culture. But that ground was eroded. "Top 40 was ultimately destroyed as a medium of significance by the same people who invented it, or their inheritors."²³⁸ The effect of the industry's defensive post-slump strategy was the exclusion of unproven talent: unproven in terms of track record (no million-sellers in the artist's discography) or sound (the artist doesn't sound *like* anyone who has sold millions of records). "Experience has shown that blockbusters can't be predicted positively.... But they can be predicted negatively, and they will be: it's going to get even harder for marginal artists with zero-plus platinum potential to find backing."²³⁹ The Top 40 audience consisted of less-than-avid music fans, but their interest made mega-platinum records happen. Thus, the least enthusiastic slice of the music-buying pie became the most fervently sought. This all but destroyed the possibility of Top 40

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

being a culturally unifying force.

Making matters worse, payola—"the always common-enough practice of payfor-play"—became a higher stakes game in the early '80s. "It's generally agreed that without a total outlay of between \$50,000 and \$75,000 to certain key CHR stations it's virtually impossible to break any but the most obvious superstar singles."²⁴⁰ Just as Christgau had once dismissed rock-is-dead rumors as so much melodramatic ballyhoo, he never worried excessively about payola until the 1980s, when what was once a "sometimes thing" became an "ironclad precedent."²⁴¹ Stations took advantage of a superabundance of passable, programmable music—way more than 40 songs in a given week—by extracting money from labels. "The pop hook which was once the professional secret of an elite of songwriters and producers has been mastered by literally thousands of young aspirants.... So arbitrary distinctions have to be made."²⁴² This in itself didn't make it impossible for a song pushed under the table to knock listeners' socks off, but it did make it harder for disc jockeys to express their own sheer enthusiasm. "And sheer enthusiasm is always where the best rock and roll has found its edge."²⁴³

The aforementioned issues—cassette tapes, new music, MTV, the erosion of Top 40 consensus, payola—all fed into "Rock 'n' Roller Coaster"'s polemical undertow. The ultimate "problem" for pop music, Christgau thought, was the capitalism embedded in its DNA. This was inescapable, but problematic nevertheless, and its presence made a divisive intervention in the pop music audience. Driven to the

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

margins by a promotional strategy that viewed their "vertical" tastes as obsolete, rock fans grew increasingly chary of non-rock musics. The oppositional strain of thought known as "rockism"—developed and asserted primarily in the British music press in the early 1980s—sought to protect the integrity and authenticity of rock music. But rockists ultimately reinforced the music industry's dominant prejudices, as well as alienating many discerning listeners who shared their skepticism of the mainstream. In a sense, it was easier for a knowledgeable skeptic to find faults with rockism than to attempt to formulate a coherent critique of the business practices of the rapidly consolidating major label system.

No champion of free market capitalism, Christgau did his part to assuage the academic debate between rockists and popists. But rather than aloofly enumerating vices and virtues in an attempt to reconcile both strains of thought, he focused instead on the root problem: the restructuring of the record industry. Unlike some rockists, Christgau didn't deny rock's in-grown commercialism. Rather, he took that commercialism for an integral part of the "spirit" rock chauvinists tended to romanticize. "Rock and roll," he wrote:

is capitalist in its blood. Its excitement has always been bound up in the individualistic get-up-and-go of ambitious young men who looked around their land of plenty and decided that they deserved—hell, just plain wanted—a bigger piece, and it would never have reached its constituency or engendered its culture without the entrepreneurial derring-do of countless promoters, hustlers, petty criminals, and other small businessmen.²⁴⁴

By 1984, those promoters, hustlers, petty criminals, and smalltime entrepreneurs had

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

been subsumed by international conglomerates, and their spawn were "rarely as likeable or as visionary" as Sam Phillips or Alan Freed or Berry Gordy had been.²⁴⁵ In the '50s and '60s, the myth of American prosperity and the "capitalist land of plenty" was more convincing, because more attainable. But by the end of the first Reagan term, growing economic inequality and the erosion of audience consensus had deracinated the entrepreneurial dream of music-making. Music still occupied a central role in local subcultural economies, but international corporatization forced aspiring pop musicians to adjust their expectations. Independent labels and distributors just couldn't put up the money required to break a band on a national scale. By signing with an indie, bands relinquished potential audience and resources in exchange for modest (yet perhaps more sustaining) do-it-yourself credibility. But regardless of how loath musicians may have been to accept this unglamorous reality, it evidently did not deter them from making music. There were more albums than ever, and indie principles only applied until a better offer came along. "Underground' bands are pathetically eager to climb into bed with the first major to roll down the covers."²⁴⁶

Christgau tried to tap into the anger and cynicism of rock fans and producers, who had always been content to "take their fun in the far-flung interstices of the system."²⁴⁷ As those interstices became more and more remote, so did the fun. The expanding system of multi-national conglomerates no longer supplied the fulfillment necessary to sustain artists' commitment. On some level, this reflected the country's

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

mood: Under Reagan, "even all those who are doing well-who aren't hungry or homeless or out of work or in grim proximity to some foreign or domestic war zone-are rarely inclined to find much fun or fulfillment in their lot, because fun and fulfillment don't seem like the appropriate categories these days."²⁴⁸ This went double for musicians, who pessimistically saw their vocation as an "all-or-nothing, go-for-broke" gamble.²⁴⁹ It was a gamble many were willing to take, but the result artistically was a "retreat into ostrich craftsmanship."²⁵⁰ By Christgau's lights, this was taking the easy way out. "Inaccessibility both formal and physical assures that [these artists'] audiences won't be passive, and sometimes they make music galvanizing enough to jar some free-floating complacency loose as well. But by definition avant-gardists sacrifice the unique political purchase of popular form—the way it speaks to and for the populace."²⁵¹ Christgau respected artists like Boy George and Bono, however syrupy and naïve their idealism sometimes ran, for refusing to make that sacrifice. But no genres were making do like black pop and rap, which, unlike rock, still managed to draw beauty and power from the simple will to keep going.

Amid "capitalism's breakdown as a nexus of social possibility," what was an aging married rock critic to do?²⁵² "We veterans are loathe to pass the flame to either side because in rock and roll populists and avant-gardists are supposed to work together, keep each other honest—on our kind of cultural frontier, you need both

- ²⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁴⁹ Ibid.
- 250
- ²⁵¹ Ibid.
- ²⁵² Ibid.

numbers and acuteness.²⁵³ But with neither seeming so easily attainable, splitting differences proved problematic, if not impossible. Like never before in his career, the voice of realism nagged at Christgau. If an artist's only shot was to go for broke, didn't that imply that art itself was, in Christgau's word, "fucked"? Punk had vaporized what remained of Christgau's faith in rock culture, and Reaganomics was doing its part to assassinate his faith in capitalist culture. So why bother?

Like the few remaining idealists who believed in the staying power of rock and roll, Christgau refused to suspend his disbelief in eternal youth. Doing so, he thought, he would mean capitulating to a neoconservative ideology that taught Americans to expect less from their country and from themselves. "It's certainly not a simple matter of age. On the contrary, it's an idealism-in-the-negative that might conceivably foster the kind of cross-generational alliances that have always been too rare among white Americans and that are needed desperately now."²⁵⁴ While one's ability to find exhilaration in the sexuality and physical pride of rock and roll inevitably declined, Christgau admitted, growing up didn't have to mean tuning out. And if "Rock 'n' Roller Coaster's" underlying sentiment seemed overly romantic, desperate times called for beaming optimism. "Only people who insist on changing themselves are liable to end up changing the world around them, and although it would be nice to think rock and roll could change the world all by itself, I've never had much use for that fallacy. All I expect from rock and roll is what rock and roll taught me to expect: more."²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

EPILOGUE

Robert Christgau and a generation of young pop culture enthusiasts saw in rock 'n' roll an opportunity to overcome long-standing problems in American culture and art. With the development of a new musical culture and the emergence of Top 40 radio in the late '50s and '60s, the divisions of high and low, intelligence and pleasure, elite and popular, art and commerce got blurrier and blurrier. With the release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, they seemed likely to dissolve altogether. Unmistakably a grand work of art, the album embodied the giddy hopes of a young generation that never understood why high art had to mean low access. The week after *Sgt. Pepper's* release, Langdon Winner wrote, "was the closest Western Civilization has come to unity since the Congress of Vienna in 1815."²⁵⁶ At the Monterey International Pop Festival, *Sgt. Pepper's* imagined community of listeners materialized for one extraordinary weekend when anything seemed possible.

For anyone who expected the late-'60s counterculture to topple the old middlebrow regime and revolutionize the way Americans produced and consumed art, the ensuing years must have been a crushing disappointment. Not only was the communitarian harmony of Monterey never again reached, rock music would quickly cease to be the *vox populi*, splintering into narrower and narrower subgenres. After nearly twenty subsequent years of ambivalence and nonstarter revolutions, it became apparent that the development of the music industry had completely obviated the hope for a rock-based resolution to America's cultural tensions. If musically the genre

²⁵⁶ Langdon Winner, *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Jim Miller, (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1976), p. 158

survived in various niche styles, its imminent sense of social possibility was, in Christgau's words, "effectively dead."²⁵⁷ To some, this sense of possibility was all that ever mattered about rock music.

If there was ever an opportune time for Christgau to quit writing journalistic criticism, the mid-'80s were it. Parenthood and the exigencies brought on by the expansion and professionalization of the music press challenged Christgau's dedication to his craft. But unfortunately for him (and for serious critics in general), the times at which arts mediation is most valuable and significant are often those at which there is least incentive to write about the arts. Christgau stepping away from rock criticism in the middle of the Reagan years would have been like Roger Maris retiring from baseball in 1961. While "Rock 'n' Roller Coaster" effectively ended rock criticism's moment as the keeper of an artistic community, Christgau's work was far from done.

Using Consumer Guide as his primary weapon, Christgau confronted the challenges of corporate consolidation and neoconservative government with tenacity, optimism, and a renewed commitment to the utopia he knew to be impossible. As pop music grew more complicated, Christgau's criticism reached levels of unprecedented sophistication. Unlike many critics, he neither extolled the ostensibly authentic spirit of the growing independent music scene nor found euphoria in the media bath of *MTV* and CHR (commercial hit radio). He stood somewhere between the poles of rockism and popism, but instead of simplistically splitting the difference, he

²⁵⁷ Robert Christgau, "Rock 'n' Roller Coaster: The Music Biz on a Joyride," *Village Voice*, Feb. 7, 1984, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/musicbiz-84.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

heightened the contradictions of rock and rock criticism by opening his arms wider. No music was too goofy or too refined. While Christgau has never claimed to possess the widest musical vocabulary of any critic, Consumer Guide has come to emblemize broad critical range itself. "Having 10,000 opinions is hard," Christgau says. "And that's what the Consumer Guide represents: having 10,000 opinions."²⁵⁸ No matter how many times Christgau publicly airs his distaste for salsa or metal, readers will still see Consumer Guide as a gateway to a virtually unlimited soundscape.

Psychedelic pop and a communitarian ethos failed to erase the fuzzy boundaries of 20th century art, and in retrospect the late-'60s utopian wish for a grand democratic resolution to the structural tensions of modern culture may have seemed naïve and crazy. But if the possibility of such a resolution gave countless young intellectuals in the late '60s a reason to write seriously about popular culture, the erosion of that possibility only fortified Christgau's commitment to the public responsibility of the critic. Rather than transitioning into the glossies or escaping journalism altogether, he rededicated himself to load-it-up, hear-it-out, think-itthrough album reviewing. As a result, today we have the seemingly endless soundmap of Christgau's website (www.robertchristgau.com), an encyclopedic resource compiling 13,652 Consumer Guide reviews, as well as most of Christgau's published essays. A businesslike, image-free affair, the fetching primary color layout looks like a relic from the days of dial-up modems. It's free to all.

Greil Marcus thinks Consumer Guide is "too cryptic" to function as a

²⁵⁸ Christgau, telephone interview with author, Nov. 1, 2007

piecemeal history of the last 40 years of pop music.²⁵⁹ But taken with his non-Consumer Guide work—with the artist studies (Marcus: "models of passionate and daringly intense criticism in the guise of profiles") and think-pieces—Christgau's oeuvre gives a richer overarching sense of that period than any single book-length historical synthesis.²⁶⁰ That the Consumer Guide has remained his primary outlet throughout the last two decades further testifies to how much meaning Christgau manages to pack into those 125-word blurbs. Without being overly dependant on stylistic labels, Christgau situates popular and esoteric music alike in a frame of reference that, while broad, may sometimes elude some readers' grasp. But if nothing else, Consumer Guide still nourishes curiosity better than any of the online music review machines it can claim to have influenced. And the prose speaks for itself.

In the 1980s, industry instability and the decline of the album combined with the emergence of the corporate single and new technologies to make listening-time allocation a more complicated endeavor than ever before. Consequently, Consumer Guide assumed greatly increased value. "If you suddenly thought you might like African music but had no idea where to start listening to it," Frith says, "you'd find that [Christgau] actually wrote about it in ways that related to other things you knew about."²⁶¹ Christgau's Consumer Guide blurbs packed tons of observations about the historical, economic, and intellectual context of the material at hand. While his criticism had always acted on the impulse that good music could come from anywhere—up, down, major, indie, TV, fanzine, New York, Zimbabwe—it wasn't

²⁵⁹ Greil Marcus, email to author, Mar. 12, 2008

²⁶⁰ Simon Frith, telephone interview with author, Mar. 20, 2008
²⁶¹ Ibid.

until the '80s, when distribution channels seemed to overturn every remaining musical rock on Earth, that he actually had a good case. It was in this period that Christgau fully blossomed in the role he would occupy for the next two decades at the *Village Voice*.

As he plumbed deeper and deeper into the "Sargasso Sea of art and commerce," Christgau grew increasingly anxious of being seen as celebrating aesthetics for its own sake.²⁶² "While it's philistine to pretend that the music has no formal attractions of its own," he wrote in 1990, "that it doesn't produce works that impinge unaided upon those who know the language, it's evasive if not effete to make too much of the microcosm those works create."²⁶³ But when push came to shove, Christgau chose skeptical aestheticism as a rejoinder to the culture's increasing philistinism. Since the mid-'80s, when an explosion in artistic production met with rampant anti-intellectualism from various sources, it has become steadily more difficult to love art for a living. Simply knowing what one likes and why one likes it-the basic task of the art critic-is now no easy feat. Without cultural consensus, and without events like Monterey International Pop to drive home the obvious significance of popular art, it becomes harder to have opinions about art. By the late '80s and the emergence of rap, critics were no longer able to rely on any sort of imagined community of like-minded readers. Faced with this situation, many writers struggled to provide the basic service of guiding fans in what they might or ought to like precisely because those writers couldn't first answer that question for themselves.

²⁶² Marcus, email to author, Mar. 12, 2008

²⁶³ Christgau, "The Meaning of Rock," *Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bk-cg80/in_meaning.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

A reliable consumer guide is most valuable in just such moments of uncertainty, when, as Frith says, "genre boundaries break down and you're never quite sure what kind of music you actually like."²⁶⁴ For this reason, Christgau's writing thrived in the highly unstable cultural environment of the '80s. He trumped the increasing fragmentation and specialization of the rock press by accepting the risk of seeming marginal and throwing himself into his work with renewed vigor.

Some critics found Christgau's continued determination to be absurd. "It's almost unimaginable to me that someone of that intelligence and sophistication could have devoted this monument to grading records," Jim Miller says. "It's kind of mind-boggling."²⁶⁵ It was and is. Among Christgau's contemporaries who stayed involved with music to some extent, no one went about it quite the way he did. Few have confronted diminishing wages, respect, and column inches with such aplomb. Those first generation critics who didn't drop off, die, or become industry hacks have largely drifted into academia and book-length scholarship, or landed prestige gigs at upmarket glossy publications. A notable example is Miller, who now teaches at the New School. "I preferred [academia] to being at a place like *Newsweek*," he says, "for the reasons Dan Bell gave when he resigned from *Fortune* in the '50s. When they were incredulous and said 'Why are you leaving,' Dan said, 'June, July and August."²⁶⁶

The idea of free summers always appealed to Simon Frith, who used a career in academia as platform for writing rock journalism. "The great advantage to me of

²⁶⁴ Frith, telephone interview with author, Mar. 20, 2008

 ²⁶⁵ Jim Miller, telephone interview with author, Feb. 18, 2008
 ²⁶⁶ Ibid.

being an academic," he says, "was the fact that [in my freelance work] I could afford to do what I wanted to do rather than having to say yes to a whole lot of things I didn't want to do."²⁶⁷ Frith's academic background also gave him a base for conducting book-length investigations of rock music. While generally regarded as too sober by the early '90s cultural studies movement, his Sound Effects and Music for *Pleasure* have had a surprisingly extensive influence with even the more gonzoschooled pop critics at contemporary online magazines like *Pitchfork*. Christgau's 1982 claim of *Sound Effects* that "no book has ever put together more good ideas about rock and roll" still makes a solid argument, and while Frith's retiring prose has come under fire for draining the life from his subject, no critic I've spoken to is more progressive-minded and optimistic about the internet-led DIY-ization of rock coverage.²⁶⁸ "Occasionally a magazine that's not usually a music magazine might publish an interesting article about music," he says. "But on everyday terms I'm more likely to find an interesting discussion of music on Simon Reynolds' website than I am in any newspaper or magazine."²⁶⁹

The only active first generation rock critic who rivals Christgau in terms of literary esteem is Greil Marcus. An American Studies scholar who studied at U.C. Berkeley around the same time as Simon Frith, Marcus earned due approbation in the 1970s for his book *Mystery Train*. Stylistically, *Mystery Train* is *Sound Effects*' opposite—*too* romantic. Harnessing the brilliant energy of the rock's cultural explosion, Marcus applied a myth-and-symbol reading to a selection of his favorite

²⁶⁷ Frith, telephone interview with author, Mar. 20, 2008

²⁶⁸ Christgau, "It's Barely Rock 'n' Roll, But I Like It," *Village Voice*, May 18, 1982, <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bkrev/frith.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

²⁶⁹ Firth, telephone interview with author, Mar. 20, 2008

artists: Sly and the Family Stone, the Band, Randy Newman, Elvis Presley. Marcus's exuberant prose tried to explain rock as a deeply rooted democratic art with significance beyond sales and listeners. Describing Sly Stone's connection to the African-American vigilante legend Staggerlee, Marcus wrote:

Locked in the images of a thousand versions of the tale is an archetype that speaks to fantasies of casual violence and casual sex, lust and hatred, ease and mastery, a fantasy of style and steppin' high. At a deeper level it is a fantasy of no-limits for a people who live within a labyrinth of limits every day of their lives, and who can transgress them only among themselves.²⁷⁰

Mystery Train unapologetically avoided any discussion of the music industry, opting instead to present vibrant, unmediated images of powerful rock 'n' roll. But by the mid-'80s, after a decade-plus of rock's fragmentation and general decline, the book's perspective seemed somewhat quaint. As the industry began to earn its reputation as a profit-mad monolith, it no longer seemed appropriate to celebrate and historicize rock's democratic conviviality. Marcus responded with *Lipstick Traces*, a quasi-academic, highly literary study of the marginal avant-garde tradition of the Situationists, the Dadas, and the Communards. Marcus saw the Sex Pistols as latter-day vectors of this tradition, which kept alive the flame of a democratic artistic community at a time when the culture seemed extremely unfriendly to democracy and art. Depressing though it is to think of *Lipstick Traces* as an epitaph of rock's sense of expansive social possibility, the book celebrates the ways in which meaningful artistic

²⁷⁰ Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), p. 66

movements often arise from hostile social conditions. In the sense that his work continues to concern the ways in which art overcomes, rather than reinforces and legitimates, social and cultural divisions, Marcus remains very close to Christgau in spirit, even though their specific musical tastes have drifted apart.

Just as *Lipstick Traces* found qualified hope amid cultural ruin, Christgau saw rock's '80s nadir as a chance for some kind of rebirth. If there were more reasons to be worried than to be optimistic, there were fewer reasons to despair than to be curious. Christgau began his decade-ending essay "Rockism Faces the World" with a rundown of all the negative changes of music in the '80s; he ended by noting that during the decade "rock evolved tremendously as mere music."²⁷¹ The compliment sounds backhanded, but insofar as mere music can inspire people to make more and better mere music, that was a good thing. So in a decade where "stars replaced artists as bearers of significance," "fragmentation went kerblooey," "rock became more and less political," "technology changed everything," racial turmoil intensified, and U.S. corporations evolved into international behemoths, Christgau found more than a few reasons for living:

Internationalization has its dire aspects—multinational corporations scare the shit out of me, thank you—but as we absorb the plastic images promulgated in a bright and hooky world-pop lingua franca, it's also inevitable that we'll familiarize ourselves with the semilegible aesthetics of somewhat grainier local cultures—collective realities epitomized by representative individuals. Just the kind of thing the nongreat album is made for.²⁷²

 ²⁷¹ Christgau, "Decade: Rockism Faces the World," *Village Voice*, Jan. 2, 1990, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/decade-89.php, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ²⁷² Ibid.

In lieu of Great Albums and Rock Heroes, synthesizers and diversity. Not such a bad trade off, especially if one hadn't put much credence in the rock myth in the first place. In his previous decade wrap, Christgau had proclaimed Neil Young hero of the '70s. This time, he nominated Prince, but only as a matter of course. A rhythm-savvy "synth maven" great at making mere music, Prince elevated "loving sex" to a worldview, but tough luck if you hoped he had "Anything Else to Say."²⁷³ In other words, he was no hero—merely a resplendent American idol.

Christgau expected the ensuing decade to be similarly short on romantic legends. "Pondering the lines of historical force, I think the rock hero of the '90s will be nobody."²⁷⁴ I think he was wrong. The '90s found their long-lost rock hero early in the decade. And unlike Springsteen's beautiful-loser fatalism, Kurt Cobain's lifesucks defeatism spoke truths too depressing to be recuperated. That task would fall to bands like Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, who did an unconvincing job acting concerned over the horizontal exposure Cobain killed himself trying to resist. Rock having withstood ominous tragedy after ominous tragedy, there was no reason to believe Cobain's suicide signaled "the music's death knell."²⁷⁵ But it certainly drove home a point. "The message of his death is that music isn't triumph enough on a mortal coil that's been getting harder ever since Kurt Cobain was born."²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

 ²⁷⁵ Christgau, "Artistic Statement of the Year," *City Pages*, 1994,
 <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/music/artist94-cp.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008
 ²⁷⁶ Ibid.

Cobain set a standard—the '90s rock hero was the rock martyr. He reappears most powerfully in the Notorious B.I.G., the legendary Brooklyn rapper who like Cobain never wished to be a martyr at all. "Equally devoid of morbidity and joie de vivre," Christgau wrote in his A review of B.I.G.'s 1997 album *Life After Death* (released two weeks after the rapper's murder), "Biggie is far more sardonic, selfdeprecating, and tough-minded, 'ready to die' in the cast-a-cold-eye sense."²⁷⁷ But the fact that Biggie's death occasioned an era of decadent escapism in rap—epitomized by the cinematic, Hype Williams-produced music videos of his former producer and artistic executor, Puff Daddy—serves to underscore how thoroughly pop music has divested itself of heroes.

In the spirit of utopia, I've been applying the qualifier "rock" to artists who don't sound it. Prince is a *sui generis* pop star who explodes categories, Notorious B.I.G. a rapper whose eminence and skills continue to be invoked by pretty much every young artist looking to align himself with the best aspects of hip-hop tradition. But far from undermining their autonomy, to call these artists rock 'n' rollers—and to say that the *most* rock 'n' roll music since the second half of the '80s isn't rock music at all—is to do what rock 'n' roll did initially: to question the boundaries of popular music and demand that art do more than merely master arbitrary formal systems. If people find today's preponderance of hyperspecific subgenres so frustrating because the labels don't seem to mean anything, perhaps the labels don't seem to mean anything because they only describe formal properties (and usually poorly, at that). Technically, rock 'n' roll was a short-lived musical moment in the mid-'50s. But even

 ²⁷⁷ Christgau, "Consumer Guide," *Village Voice*, July 22, 1997,
 <u>http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv797-97.php</u>, accessed Apr. 12, 2008

after dropping the "roll" it continued to accrue meanings having nothing to do with aesthetic properties. Rock 'n' roll, I'd argue, is now a byword for a kind of opportunistic, quintessentially democratic spirit that both loves fun and uses fun to its political advantage.

By that standard, rap music is (was?) great rock 'n' roll. But of the early rock critics who still wrote in the 1980s, only the most open-minded and imaginative realized this. Christgau loved rap because it asked for more when rock decided it had had enough. Obviously the specific nature of its demands differs greatly, but the story of rap since the '80s runs something like that of rock 'n' roll 30 years before it: countless numbers of intelligent, artistically savvy young entrepreneurs decide to go after a bigger piece. They gain fans along with enemies, and succeed on a scale unimaginable to even their most enthusiastic early champions—if not themselves. Along the way, they produce a large body of powerful and brilliant work. They succeed to some extent in outmaneuvering the recording business, but the gravitational pull of the culture industry proves too powerful to resist. So they team up with the biz, profitably if not altogether equitably, and dominate American popular music for well over a decade—until an acute sales slump leaves the fate of the music in doubt. If this story sounds familiar, then we're probably overdue for another "Rock 'n' Roller Coaster."