

Mogul Rock

Solidarity Federation

Winter 1998

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The British pop music press used to be fairly easy to designate into its various categories; there were the glossy mags for teenie boppers, the more serious magazines for the middle of the road types and the inkie papers — for the pop fan who was a bit more serious about their music than the teenie boppers, but less staid in taste than the typical glossy reader. These people (and I was one) were catered for by three weekly tabloid newspapers; Sounds, Melody Maker and New Musical Express.

Of the three of them one is no more; Sounds went bust. The two main indie/alternative orientated papers Melody Maker and NME remained, in the same building owned by the same people, but seemingly at each other's throats. It was not so much a battle of ideology, aesthetics or genre as a battle of floors. As the '90s progressed, the circulation of both these papers began to fall and they began to lose readers and their way. The arrangement had always been nice and comfortable; certain bands were big and still vaguely credible, other bands the labels wanted to be big and were putting money into them. The papers survived off big features on these two, leaving a little space for the enthusiasts amongst the journalists to rabbit on about their passions. The main problem was they never really recovered from the indie/alternative post-punk scene coming out of the shadows and into the bright lights of the mainstream charts or from the onset of the dance scene.

When alternative style music (always a misnomer) became more mainstream, and the daily and weekend papers began to take it more seriously, the inkie papers began to lose their exclusive access to the market and readership. Then appeared a new breed of monthly glossies led by Vox and Select, who were staffed by almost the same stable of journalists. This coincided with the increasing development of dance music as another major 'alternative' to mainstream pop. The inkie papers were extremely late to take dance music seriously, by which time there had been a whole host of dance music magazines launched. We get to the situation where the music press has expanded greatly in the number of titles, but collapsed in the standard of journalism and range of coverage.

Dance music is covered by a number of usually monthly magazines with titles such as M-8 (Loaded for the repetitive beat generation — not a compliment), Jockey Slut, Muzik, and Wax — my personal favourite for its attempts to not stick half-clad women on every page, its exhaustive but not exhausting reviews, and its sensible approach to wider issues such as Reclaim the Streets, drugs, drinks, star DJ greed and the like. The alternative glossies seem to have stagnated, with Vox being missing presume defunct at the moment. There has been a seeming blossoming in teenie bopper mags, though this is assumed from looking at the shelves in newsagents.

The two remaining inkie papers seem to be on a headlong slide to oblivion. Melody Maker has abandoned whatever standards of journalism it had and sought a younger readership, though quite why this should tie up with such trite writing I am not sure. The Maker does, however, have one advantage over its stable mate; it is a bit cheaper. I have always had a bias against the smug NME, which seems to fancy itself as a bit intellectual. Whilst it has had some outstanding journalists I always got the feeling that there was an editorial line in which passion for music was seen as a bit suspicious. It was okay to like music, but to get all hot and sweaty about it was just not on. You just knew that half of them had Alan Parsons Project records, and could actually listen to them without disembowelling themselves to end the terror of the tedium. Despite all this, I still get at least one inkie every week — normally the one with the free CD.

hard pressed

So what is the role of the music press in selling music? Well, frankly, they do not compare to the influence of radio or TV. What the music press would claim to do is allow established bands to communicate in greater depth with their fans and provide a much wider source of information than other media. They also would claim to have a role in hunting out new and exciting talent.

Now, if bands want to communicate with their fans they could put appropriate sleeve notes in their records. Established bands go through the tedium of being interviewed by the music press purely to remind the world that they exist and that their exciting new product is out there. The press regularly claims it uses these big name features to attract readers to attract advertisers to allow it to cover new and exciting music – a claim which is most suspect. The suspicion lingers not because the music press haven't championed new bands, they have done and still occasionally do, but because a lot of these bands are already signed to big labels, or big labels pretending to be little labels. These bands are getting the backing already. It surely isn't a coincidence that these new and exciting bands also seem to have an advertising budget?

When the music press does get excited about new bands who don't appear to have label backing, what do we get? Romo!! Melody Maker's (or rather the admittedly usually quite reliable Simon Price's) attempt to resurrect and update early eighties new romantic ideals with really shite music. Where is Romo now? (Come to that, where was Romo then?) It did briefly attract a few fanatical followers, but apart from that it attracted almost universal derision. I just dug out the free tape, Fiddling while Romo burns..., and wow, was it really that bad? With the possible exception of Hollywood's Lights, camera, revolution, which is too silly to be bad...

The sad thing is the music press don't even provide the Romo level of service any more. The Maker is trying to tell us that the only bands that matter are stuffed with teenagers. Otherwise, they are trying to foist Alan 'Cloth Ears' McGee's latest sub-Oasis dirge merchants on us. Oasis are/were a good band, Noel stole well and put together fine and memorable tunes, but the rest of them don't even know who to rob.

those new bands

So, the music press hardly ever breaks new bands. It is almost always the band, then, if they are lucky enough to get signed, the label, that breaks new bands. At best, the press is just one sub-channel. So much is dependent on labels. You won't get on TV or daytime radio without one: Bis on Top of the Pops was a one off. Labels, with the exception of some of the smaller truly independent labels that still struggle to exist, want to make as much money as possible and don't really give a monkeys for the music. They want to sign bands that they can sell hard, and if they don't sell they drop them straight off.

There are now two approaches for a label signing a 'new' band. Firstly, a label signs some obscure band with a mass of hype and big notes advances and the music press dribbles along drinking the free drink and giving the new little darlings big publicity. These bands are frequently shallow reflections of whatever the latest thing was. Thus, Nirvana were followed by a feeding frenzy in which labels sought to sign up any noisy guitar bands who had ever found Seattle on the map. Oasis, as mentioned above, spawned some of the worse sins against music lovers ever.

This is all reflected in the music press as they swim wildly with the current, trying to be just one step ahead of those not quite in the know.

Chumbas & Blaggers

The other option, is where big labels wait for bands to work up a following, get themselves established and, when they have proven they can make money, wave the Wonga at them. Thus, bands struggle along for years with barely a hint of press, gathering a lot of friends and supporters by putting out good records and playing live well. Then, all of a sudden, they get snatched up by some big paying label and they are media darlings for a few months. Two examples that spring to mind are Chumbawamba and the Blaggers ITA, both of whom signed to that arch bogeyman of a label, EMI. (though the latter seemed to blow it when they beat up the aforementioned Simon Price). Indeed, EMI seem to like signing 'political' bands — Gang of Four upset a few people when they went to EMI, and New Model Army didn't really upset that many people when they did.

independence?

As to the question of whether it is possible to exist outside all the commercial hooha, well, bands do. Chumbawamba existed for years almost completely ignored by the music press, which, given some of the embarrassing nonsense they are prone to spout in interviews, was probably a good thing. Obviously, now they have gone big label so they are in the swim with the rest and have become legitimate music press material. Other bands remain outside through choice. The Dutch band The Ex have been around for eons with barely a quarter column in the music press, allowing them to get on with their lives not worrying about what will be said, whether they sell more or less record. Of course, the down side is it is bloody hard to find out owt about them.

alternative media

There are alternatives to the music press. In your local Cyber Cafe, you can now pick up information on all manner of obscure bands from all over the world on the Internet. I had a great time recently chasing down recordings by Bright, a chilled post-rock band from the States. I also tracked down Usura from Spain and stuff coming out on dance labels such as Dust2Dust and Fused and Bruised.

Small labels and bands can develop mailing lists with which to keep those who want to know in touch. Arch-druid, ex-Teardrop Explodes front man and prime candidate for barmpot of Britain Julian Cope regularly sends me postcards of stone circles detailing his latest.. er.. exploits.

fanzines

It's also common for small labels and specialist mail-order type places to send out occasional bulletins. These lead nicely onto fanzines, and fanzine culture is still going strong. There are clearly still plenty of single-minded obsessives producing pages of densely typed waxings on

their favourite bands and why everyone else is crap. Fanzines brought us lots of punk and post-punk in the late seventies, jangle pop in the eighties, riot girl in the nineties. You still get them at some gigs, where tired looking people wander up to you with a stack of folded paper asking for a quid. These are peoples attempts to circumvent the power of the labels and their dominance of the music press. This reflects what happens on wider social issues. Information about environmental issues, strikes, protests and the like are generally not spread through the pages of the Guardian and the Mirror. Instead, information is spread though word of mouth, mailing lists and ad hoc networks, alternative papers and journals and, increasingly, through the Internet.

As with the spread of political and social ideas, the use of alternative sources for the spreading of music information falls down in a number of places. The biggest is the range and spread of people you can reach. Not everyone has a computer and very few people go into bookshops and pick up radical newspapers. Likewise, not many people go into obscure little record shops and pick up fanzines. Selling at a gig/demo only reaches the already active/interested.

pressing on

If you want to reach a wider audience is it worth trying to play the mainstream game, and seek to minimise the distortion and twisting that that involves? This does rather bring us back to cosyng up to the stinking giant that is Music Inc.

Not exactly. The mainstream have the resources and access to information and breadth that is not available to small low budget alternatives. Music media is, after all, a microcosm of the wider media. It is nearly all owned by the same corporations, who control access to bands and advertising revenue, and so control what goes onto the pages. The journalists are simply journalists — often lazy and ill informed, or at best, know the score with their career, and swallow whatever press releases come their way.

As a consequence, they tend to stifle imagination and variety rather than encourage it. The music press, like the mainstream press, does tolerate the odd spirit of hope, but this is the exception, and in any case, is hope enough?

The reality is that fanzines and various non-commercial information networks exist. Alternative media can, is and will develop. Until it does, the corporate mass-media have a strangle hold on information. We need the music press, but to rely on it for all our information on music would be to voluntarily put on the blinkers they have prepared for us.

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