

Beautiful

POP MUSIC CRITICS OF COLOR

AND THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE

Struggles

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Critical Minded is a grant-making and learning initiative whose work is focused on resourcing and raising the visibility of critics and writers through direct support to publications and individuals, research, and convening.

Launched from a national convening of critics in 2017, Critical Minded emerged from the belief that engaging critically with the ideas and images that surround us is a prerequisite for transforming our cultural landscape and preserving democracy.

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FOREWORD

By HUA HSU

I've been listening for twenty-seven years, yet I still don't know how I feel about *Agharta* and *Pangaea*, a pair of live albums that Miles Davis and his band recorded in Osaka in 1975. I sought them out immediately after reading "The Electric Miles," an essay by the late critic Greg Tate in his collection *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*. At the time, I didn't know much about this period of Davis's career, and I had no real sense of who was in his band or how divisive these albums had been upon release. Heck, I didn't even know about *Flyboy*, published in 1992, until a friend loaned it to me after I started writing some music reviews for a local magazine. All I knew was

that the way this person described this music—a "swinging infinity of new colors" that had something to do with George Clinton and Jimi Hendrix, but also with Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez—made me feel like I needed to hear it for myself as soon as possible. I was astounded by how this music could inspire such writing. Greg's style felt half symposium, half house party, and it made me rethink what sentences were capable of doing.

I grew up around music magazines—my father was a casual reader of *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*—and, as a teenager, I became obsessed with independent magazines, weeklies, and zines I discovered on my own. But reading Greg was different. He was using criticism to tell a story, not just about Davis, but about the hidden worlds you could hear in the howls and wah-wah, if you only knew how to listen for the signs. I had made a zine where I sharpened my animosities and gushed about my enthusiasms, adopting polemical modes that were largely imitative. But I had never thought of writing as a method for lingering, a strategy for resisting time and staying in these fleeting, sublime moments of a captivating song for a beat longer. Greg's criticism was less about why something was good or bad than about how it hinted at visions of life that we

needed art to help us imagine. And he convinced me that *Agharta* and *Pangaea* were important, even if I couldn't yet understand them.

This is what criticism does. We imagine why something sounds the way it does—what was the artist responding to? Where were they trying to go? Maybe we dream of what it could have been, an intimate exercise in bringing into focus a world we hope to live in. It's a lot to ask of a song, but then again songs are how we might first learn about love and loss, the power of a rhyme, or the enchanting possibilities of intertwined voices. I never had faith in the purely evaluative, thumbs-up or -down aspects of the job, or maybe I just lacked the courage to wield my opinions like a bludgeon. I was always drawn to the challenge of explaining what a song captured about the experience of being alive at any precise moment—and why being alive now felt distinct and special.

To conceive of criticism in such lofty terms probably marks me as a holdover from a different era. I entered the game in the early aughts, when it was still conceivable to pay the rent through a combination of capsule reviews and short essays. My early bylines were in *URB*, a Los Angeles-based magazine that focused on hip-hop and dance culture, and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, an alternative weekly. Neither are still around, at least not in any form I recognize. From there, I moved onto the *Village Voice* and magazines like *Vibe* and *The Wire*. I wrote reviews for decent money for an early iteration of Amazon, and I wrote at least two profiles of rappers in return for T-shirts. There was a vague trajectory one followed at that time, from zines and independent music magazines to alternative weeklies and newspapers to glossies and general interest publications. Even if the top-tier magazines were heavily gatekept, it didn't matter, there was a thriving middle tier of regional or niche titles that you could still seek out. Back then, you could work for years, conforming to the house styles of various magazines and newspapers, simply for the opportunity to one day write a thousand-word essay in your own voice.

I'd like to think the same ambitions are still in play, and that people still want to respond to the sounds that captivate them through critical writing. And if your only objective is to have your ideas circulate beyond your peers and friends, then critics no longer have to jump through all those hoops simply to write about the things that truly matter to them. But it's next to impossible to

make a living. *Beautiful Struggles: Pop Music Critics of Color and the Critical Landscape* is an attempt to survey the current state of the field. It follows from convenings and conversations initiated by Critical Minded to understand the needs and particular challenges facing working critics today. Journalism is in a perilous place, not just economically, with newspapers and magazines folding at an alarming rate, but politically, too, as demagogues encourage everyday people to view journalists as their foes. Within the industry, there's a fierce competition for resources. As with society at large, there's a concentration of status and resources at the top and many at the bottom vying for a foothold, with very few opportunities in the middle. Critics of color are front and center at many of the most prestigious publications around, winning awards and shaping the cultural discourse. Yet the vast majority struggle to find meaningful, paid work. And the overall precarity of the system creates more situations where writers feel at odds with the economic imperatives of weakened publications looking to manage their artist or label relationships.

Critics remain motivated by the same curiosities and impulses as before, only the sites for that criticism continue to evolve. When Critical Minded began, in 2017, we focused almost exclusively on criticism in print publications and traditional websites. Over time, we've expanded to think about emerging spaces for critical discourse, from social media and podcasts to streaming video and newsletters. We've seen the growth of media collectives and hyper-local news sites, as well as the occasional return to one-off print zines. On the one hand, it shows the resourcefulness of today's writers and editors, who continue doing the work even as the industry faces a crisis. With traditional avenues to access cut off, critics have become savvier about scrutinizing the systems behind today's stars, as well as the effect that streaming platforms or the mainstreaming of brand partnerships have on our listening habits. But it's also a sign of how difficult it is to get paid that so much of the job of being a writer in 2026 requires fundraising, promotion, and coming up with novel subscription models.

From its very beginnings, pop music criticism has faced a unique set of ethical questions. For the first half of the twentieth century, the only music most publications saw fit to cover was classical. Whether they were writing for *Rolling Stone* or *The Source*, writers were drawn to the mission

of taking rock or hip-hop seriously, stemming from a desire to uplift worlds that were looked down upon by the mainstream. Genres take turns seeming unserious and faddish, until they are suddenly the biggest thing on the planet, the central countercultural force to be reckoned with.

Reading *Beautiful Struggles*, one is struck by the evolving role that fandom plays in how critics do their jobs. Some writers lament the hivemind thinking of fans, doing the bidding of artists who are sensitive to criticism. For others, it's how fandom has become the prevailing lens through which we view art, a larger aversion to any commentary perceived as harsh or negative. With access at a premium and few publications willing to push back, writers are left feeling helpless to the predations of the attention economy.

In 2024, Critical Minded worked with the Columbia Journalism School and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to stage *Word: Life*,* a two-day conference on the history of hip-hop journalism. It felt a bit like a class reunion for the generation of predominantly Black and Brown writers, photographers, and designers who came of age with magazines like *Vibe* and *The Source*. A few years earlier, Greg Tate had observed the “radical transformation” that hip-hop criticism offered those cohorts of writers in the '70, '80s, and '90s. “It was the first time in the history of the music that Black writers were writing about it authoritatively as it was being created.”

During the conference, there were a lot of conversations about publication models that simply aren't coming back. But what the conversations modeled was a kind of collective endeavor, a desire to grow together as a gang of critics and thinkers, partly in public and partly in private. After all, isn't this how it all starts? An argument, a desire to share something you love, a compulsion to figure something out with the help of other people. One of the takeaways of *Beautiful Struggles* is how atomized the world of critics has become, yet how critics continue seeking one another out for camaraderie and community. Writing and pitching have always been solitary activities, an isolation exacerbated at a time when most of us work from home. If there's anything we can bring with us from the past, it is that sense of cohort, the networks that help you recognize you are part of larger conversations that stretch across time.

We cannot cede this aspect of what makes the work meaningful, whether it's a friendly sounding board for your thoughts or just someone to listen to you vent. As I reread “The Electric Miles,” I missed Greg all over again. We weren't particularly close, but I looked forward to a day when I might eventually ask him about *Pangaea* and *Agharta*. I thought about all the years-long, running conversations I've had with the critics who've shaped me, whether in real life or on the page. I've listened to these two albums so much over the past few years, now that I'm approaching the age that Davis, at once a genius and a vile man, was when he recorded them. I still don't know how I feel about them, yet I keep listening because they make me feel so much: ecstasy, dread, awe, endless gardens of forking paths, terror and serene beauty, primordial funk, feeling aware of mortality yet never so alive. The sounds of Davis and his band are pulsing and vital, always evolving, even if they were long ago committed to tape. I hear the mysteries we have devoted ourselves to describing, once we finally discover the words.

Hua Hsu is a staff writer at the *New Yorker* and the author of *A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure Across the Pacific* (Harvard University Press, 2016) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Stay True* (Doubleday, 2022). Hsu teaches at Bard College. He is on the board of Critical Minded and he publishes *Suspended in Time*, a series of zines about music and life.

INTRODUCTION

HOW SOON
IS NOW?

By OLIVER WANG

AS PART OF MY WORK for this report, I interviewed an early-career music critic who shared many insightful thoughts on the relevance of cultural criticism in our current moment. In particular, this stuck with me: “As we move into the little seedlings of fascism that have been sprinkled throughout politics, I think criticism is now more necessary than ever, because if nobody’s challenging the art that’s being made, and nobody’s demanding better than mediocrity, we can’t move forward as a culture.” However, they also added the sobering observation that, “I think because everybody can do it now, there’s less importance on it As a result, traditional music criticism as we know it, has been devalued.”

This interviewee captures a core contradiction facing contemporary pop music criticism. On the one hand, criticism *should* be as relevant as ever, especially in a terrifying time of revanchist, racist agendas targeting marginalized communities, including rights to free expression. On the other, the perceived value of criticism in the US—symbolically and financially—has been on a long, downward spiral, leaving critics to grapple with both material and existential threats to their livelihoods.

This has been an ongoing crisis for practically the entire 21st century, especially in the wake of large-scale economic forces that continue to decimate the American middle class and its traditional media industries. Nearly ten years ago, in a conversation with arts and entertainment reporter Hady Mawajdeh, film critic Jerome Weeks suggested that the disappearance of staff critic positions at older newspapers and magazines was being driven by “ongoing, punishing, marketplace economics” destabilizing the entire social system that once supported those publications:

Being middle class demands far more of us now ... Most of us ... simply don’t have the time or energy to seek out reviews and read them any more ... When we try to find some cultural connections in our immediate urban surroundings, it’s easier just to catch a fleeting Facebook tout from a friend instead of tracking down a thoughtful essay somewhere.¹

In other words, it’s not that readers aren’t interested in criticism; it’s that structural forces

¹ Weeks, Jerome, and Hady Mawajdeh. 2017. “News-papers Are Banishing All Their Arts Writers. Or, Wait, Is That the Good News?” Art&Seek (KERA), October 27, 2017. <https://artandseek.org/2017/10/27/arts-critics-are-disappearing-from-newspapers-or-wait-is-that-the-good-news>.

deter people from becoming readers to begin with. As Weeks suggested, “the Great Recession damaged fundamental structures in our economy and culture—or exposed inequities that have been with us for a while now, damage we’re still struggling to understand.”

Meanwhile, the brief mention of Facebook highlights the particular role that technology has played in these shifts. Over thirty years ago, in the earliest days of the public Internet, my foray into music writing happened on Usenet newsgroups—precursors to modern message boards and forums—where I discussed various hip-hop singles and albums. Although, I had no self-conception back then that I was “writing criticism,” it’s not lost on me that, from the very beginning of a writing career that now spans four decades, I was already acclimating myself to creating online content with no expectation of compensation.

The continuing role of technology was hammered home by veteran music critic Ann Powers in a 2014 conversation with fellow critic Carl Wilson for NPR Music: “Writers ... are losing jobs to unpaid bloggers, and peer-to-peer recommendation on streaming services eliminates the need for radio disc jockeys and record clerks ... Everyone can be a critic, after all, posting playlists and YouTube responses, blogging and Tumbling, telling the world that this is my jam.”²

Powers’s references to “blogging and Tumbling”—rather than Substack-ing or TikTok-ing—inadvertently indexes the dizzying pace through which technology keeps reshaping the critical landscape and unsettling its economic foundations. Today, social media, online video, and artificial intelligence continue to transform not only criticism’s mediums and economy, but the nature of its message. Even before the current regime’s censorship campaigns, opaque and unpredictable algorithms could instantly bury content that platforms deem undesirable, and many critics, wary of virulent attacks by upset artists or fan bases, self-censor certain opinions. It all leads to a flattening of critical discourse. To that point, in 2025, the *New Yorker*’s Kelefa Sanneh wrote the well-circulated essay, “How Music Criticism Lost Its Edge,” arguing,

On blogs, you could draw a crowd with a contrary opinion, but on social media you became a ringleader by saying things that your followers could publicly agree

with. As the magazine world shrank, much professional reviewing was done not by all-purpose critics... who covered just about everything, but by freelancers, who might be assigned reviews based on their affinity for the performer, which created a built-in positive bias.³

These changes don’t just impact livelihoods. Sanneh believed they presaged perilous shifts in the culture of criticism itself since, in a climate of excessive caution and consensus, he believes it’s become “bad manners to criticize any cultural product that people liked ... The idea that people’s tastes have a right not to be criticized is, of course, quite fatal to the idea of criticism itself.”⁴ In other words, he—and many others—suggest that our critical landscape is becoming less ... critical.

Film critic Wesley Morris shared a similar concern regarding music writing during the 2021 Pop Conference* roundtable, “The Vitality of Black Criticism,” opining: “there is a real reluctance to seriously engage with the work and the craft of the work and what pop music is doing, what it sounds like. I don’t know if that’s a fear of getting it wrong. I don’t know if that’s a fear of what Twitter might do to you if you do get it wrong.” For Morris, these issues are tied to a larger “question of ethics, which is what is falling in that lacuna between greatness and crap that only criticism can both explicate and reify in some way. To me, it feels like a crisis that nobody’s really acknowledging.”⁵ Part of the goal of this report is to acknowledge and confront these and other crises facing music criticism today.

Thirty years ago, when I started writing about music professionally, I had many friends who were full-time, salaried writers and editors at places like local alternative weeklies, regional magazines, national publications, and early websites. While many of them still create criticism in some form or other, only a tiny few still remain in full-time positions as critics; the last of their kind, it feels. My personal privilege was always that—despite writing for more outlets than I can (or care to) remember—I was never financially *dependent* on these gigs. As a full-time academic, I have long enjoyed the flexibility to choose writing assignments based on desire rather than necessity. The same can’t be said for

² Ann Powers and Carl Wilson, “Why We Fight About Pop Music,” NPR: *The Record*, April 15, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/04/15/302831400/why-we-fight-about-pop-music>.

³ Kelefa Sanneh, “How Music Criticism Lost Its Edge,” *New Yorker*, August 7, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/08/07/how-music-criticism-lost-its-edge>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Daphne Brooks, “The Vitality of Black Criticism,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/arts/music/black-critics-pop-conference.html>. For the sake of disclosure, report co-author Wang organized the Pop Conference* that year which included that roundtable as part of the online convening.

many of my past and present peers—especially those of color—whose ambitions to pursue careers in criticism have always faced an uphill climb, especially now.

These concerns were also central in our previous report, *Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape* (2025). In that report, also commissioned by Critical Minded, we concluded that the disappearance of paid opportunities impacts critics of color disproportionately, and that the resulting “lack of diversity isn’t merely a problem within the cultural criticism profession; it has grave implications for the larger artistic/cultural sphere as it impacts whose work gets noticed, discussed, and, thus, made visible within that sphere and for posterity.”⁶

These issues are especially paramount in *music* criticism because this realm has likely produced the most opportunities for critics of color over the past fifty-plus years. Both the popularity of musical genres created and innovated by artists of color—including but not limited to hip-hop, reggaeton, R&B, regional Latin pop styles, Afro-Caribbean dance music, disco, funk, jazz, the blues, et al.—and easy availability of music via recordings, radio, streaming services, and other outlets, have all helped create opportunities for generations of people of color to write and share music criticism.

The late culture writer Greg Tate, in the same roundtable as Morris, described this as the “radical transformation that hip-hop criticism offers,” adding, “It was the first time in the history of the music that Black writers were writing about it authoritatively as it was being created.”⁷ A similar observation applies to Latine critics chronicling the surge of Latin music styles into mainstream pop over the past twenty-five years, capstoned by Bad Bunny’s halftime performance during Super Bowl LX in 2026. However, the grim irony remains: there may be a wealth and diversity of music to write about, but there’s a dearth of ways to make a sustainable living doing so. Who is left with the time and energy to create criticism if it’s a perennial side gig or passion project? How does this impact the state of cultural discourse and debate in American society?

The goal of this report series, beginning with *Topdogs and Underdogs* and continuing with *Beautiful Struggles*, is to both explore the

landscape for contemporary cultural criticism and recommend ways to support critics of color in navigating that landscape. For *Beautiful Struggles*, we intentionally wanted the scope of music criticism to not only include those working in traditional, text-based mediums like magazines, newspapers, and websites but to also encompass critics working in multimedia formats, especially podcasting and social media videos, where emergent and established critics of color alike are sharing their voices.

This report has two primary parts. The first shares results from a *national survey* our research team conducted in the summer of 2025, open to all US-based pop music critics. As far as our research team knows, no such survey, asking popular music critics about their work and pay conditions, has ever been attempted in the past twenty-five years, if ever.⁸ The results of our survey provide a window into the working lives of pop music critics of various backgrounds and levels of experience, detailing who participates in the field, how their criticism is created and compensated, and the larger cultural, economic, and technological conditions that shape their access to criticism as a livelihood. Especially as it relates to critics of color, the survey results suggest that racial difference correlates with greater challenges in navigating this ecosystem despite increasing diversity within the ranks of critics.

The second part of *Beautiful Struggles* is based on in-depth interviews with twenty-nine working critics of color, interviewed by our research team of four interviewers, all working critics of color as well. The interviewees were purposefully selected to reflect different backgrounds, years of experience, and content forms. From those myriad conversations, interviewees emphasized three broad themes: dealing with economic precarity, navigating gatekeeping forces—including online fandom—and finding/forging professional pathways in an era of instability and uncertainty. We close with a series of action-oriented recommendations for funders and similar institutions, prepared by the report co-authors and drawn heavily from interviewee testimonies.

While both parts of the report focus on the lived experiences of music critics and the complex conditions of their labor, all the parties involved—from the research team to the survey takers and interviewees—are intimately aware of the larger social context accompanying this current historical moment. When we began

⁶ Sharon Mizo-ta and Oliver Wang, *Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape*, Critical Minded, 2025.

⁷ Brooks, “The Vitality of Black Criticism.”

⁸ The Music Critics Association of North America and the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University conducted a national survey of classical music critics in 2005. See Willa J. Conrad, Lawrence McGill, Donald Rosenberg, and András Szántó, *The Classical Music Critic: A Survey of Music Critics at General-Interest and Specialized News Publications in America*, Music Critics Association of North America and National Arts Journalism Program, 2005.



working on *Topdogs and Underdogs* in 2024, we were primarily fixated on the economic forces impacting the critics, especially with the after-shocks of the COVID pandemic still affecting entire sectors, especially theater. As *Beautiful Struggles* came together a year later, the repressive political climate accompanying Trump's second presidential term has brought waves of state attacks onto the entire arts and culture community. This report's very existence, for example, runs afoul of reactionary policies deliberately designed to silence any recognition, let alone discussion, of systemic inequality.

It's little wonder that the state of critical discourse feels so fraught and diminished. And yet, the critics represented in this report—while deeply pessimistic in understandable ways—continue to believe in the important role criticism plays in an increasingly polarized society. One of the mid-career print critics we spoke with offered this perceptive argument for why criticism is so essential to cultural discourse, acknowledging on one hand that:

The consideration of the push and pull, of the possibility of disagreement, the possibility of useful discourse and where an artist is heading in their career, what they're saying about the world as it exists now, what this album is doing for the culture and in the culture, where the needle is moving, I feel like there's much rarer opportunities to find that.

At the same time however, this critic also asks people to consider criticism as an act of care and even love: "Think of the person you love the most in the world. Are you not critical with them? Are you not real with them? That's intimacy. That's love. That's how things grow. You want better. You want better for that relationship. You want better for that person."

And so we present *Beautiful Struggles*, our latest effort to explore those relationships of care and creativity in order to remind critics, institutions, and audiences what is at stake in sustaining criticism as a public service and what it will take to ensure its future.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TRANSPARENCY

We define “pop music critics of color” as writers (1) who have ancestry in one of the original peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, or the Pacific Islands, and (2) who write or speak critically about commercially popular music genres primarily consumed in the United States, including but not limited to pop (including global pop), hip-hop, rock, R&B, country, electronic/dance, and Latin music (such as Latin pop and regional Mexican styles). Throughout this report, unless specified, we use the terms “writing” and “writers” to encompass all types of criticism, including music journalism, and their creators as well as those working in audio or video formats who don’t necessarily create written content. Our use of these terms also acknowledges that most pop music critics, whether in staff or freelance roles, don’t exclusively produce criticism, but

engage in writing more broadly, including reported pieces, profiles, interviews, etc. When we need to differentiate between writers who produce text-based work and those who make audio-visual content, we use the term “print” to designate the former and “multimedia” to identify the latter. We also use “music criticism” as shorthand for “popular music criticism,” even though we acknowledge the tradition of classical music criticism that this report does not address.

Critical Minded provides funding support for a number of organizations and/or is affiliated with others through its board members and networks. When these organizations appear in this report, they are marked with an asterisk (*), indicating that the organization has received support from or has a relationship with Critical Minded.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLES FOLLOWS *Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape* (2025), and is the second in a series of reports on the conditions and challenges facing cultural critics of color in the United States. This new report focuses on popular music critics, collecting information via a survey open to all pop music critics as well as twenty-nine in-depth interviews conducted with critics of color. Our findings include concerns over growing economic precarity and ongoing racial and gender discrimination, against the backdrop of rapid and disorienting technological and funding changes affecting the publishing, media, and creative industries as a whole.

Our national survey respondents were predominantly white and male, and while the ranks of younger critics are more diverse, they lack the mentors and institutional pathways that guided their predecessors. Economic precarity prevails across the profession and is compounded for critics of color who rarely report working in full-time positions. These conditions are further exacerbated by technological changes creating pressures for critics to engage in online self-promotion while navigating volatile online fan communities. These forces disproportionately impact younger critics and critics of color who face heightened expectations around digital visibility in a time of great financial instability.

Our in-depth interviews provided greater depth and details specific to the experiences

of critics of color. Our interviewees find that criticism is not viable as a full-time profession and can often feel like a “labor of love,” demanding long hours and a mastery of different media in exchange for declining compensation. Multimedia content also contends with algorithmically driven compensation structures that are opaque and unpredictable while critics working in text-based media are increasingly pressured to operate as influencers. Such forces drive more critics to pursue self-publishing, which may provide more editorial freedom but often less compensation while inadvertently atomizing the media landscape.

In addition to a dire economic outlook, critics of color navigate forces of gatekeeping and pigeonholing that limit their opportunities and condition interactions with editors, digital platforms, artists, publicists, and fans. Gatekeeping refers to acts of exclusion that prevent critics of color from having the same writing opportunities as white colleagues, while pigeonholing is the inverse: editors and fans assuming that critics of color are only qualified to write about artists or genres related to their ethnic background, a phenomenon particularly common among Latine critics. Such discrimination is also more prevalent for women, queer, and trans critics, who may also be excluded from creating criticism about mainstream artists and topics.

Digital platforms come with their own challenges. The algorithms that determine what

content is visible and compensated are rarely transparent and reflect societal biases that promote content by white creators over those by creators of color. The rise of digital platforms has also created a two-tiered system at legacy outlets, where critics of color are often relegated to digital roles that are less prestigious with more meager compensation. Additionally, critics find the brevity of social media and online video ill-suited to substantive criticism, constraining their work and fostering superficial engagement. Most concerning, critics have to contend with online harassment from artists and fans; women, nonbinary, and trans critics of color receive the worst treatment. Despite these pressures, our critics are defiant in defending their right to say what they want.

Interviewees detailed their career pathways, emphasizing both motivations and mentors who helped propel their ambitions. However, despite their strong identification with the project of criticism, our interviewees' views of the future are relatively bleak. They predict that paid opportunities will continue to decline, especially within an increasingly atomized landscape driven by corporate consolidation and shrinking staffs and budgets, leaving many writers to turn to personal newsletters and social media to publish independent work. They shared a robust set of opinions regarding the continuing role of technology, including the perils of social media interactions and the threat of AI, to their livelihoods.

Based on both these testimonials and the survey results, we have created a set of action-oriented recommendations for improving the landscape for critics of color in four key areas: **increasing financial support, providing training, promoting community building, and generating research.** There is an urgent need for funders, institutions, and media organizations to address the economic, structural, and technological vulnerabilities reshaping the field. These endeavors require intentional investments such as paid fellowships, internships, and residencies; organized mentorship and editorial development programs; accessible training in ethics and emerging platforms and formats, and expanded leadership opportunities for editors of color. Online and in-person gatherings and events are also important to foster the community, camaraderie, and mutual aid that sustain critics through difficult times. Finally, additional research is needed, both to continue community building and dialogue around criticism with critics, and to increase awareness and understanding of current threats to public discourse. These interventions are essential not only for improving access to the profession for critics from historically underrepresented communities, but also for laying the groundwork for music criticism itself to continue to grow, evolve, and fulfill its long-term cultural, intellectual, and civic roles.

METHODOLOGIES

PART ONE OF OUR REPORT is based on a national survey distributed to US-based pop music critics of all generations, genres, and racial and ethnic backgrounds in the summer of 2025. The survey was developed in spring 2025 through discussions among the project co-leads (Sharon Mizota and Oliver Wang), data analyst (Dr. Lucy March), and research interviewers (Reanna Cruz, Paula Mejía, and John Morrison). Drawing on guiding questions from *Topdogs and Underdogs*, March formulated a survey instrument in Qualtrics to explore the landscape of contemporary music criticism with attention to the conditions and challenges critics face.

The report team refined the questions using established survey-design best practices, with particular attention to inclusive demographic language and overall clarity and length. A pilot version was tested internally by the report team and members of the Critical Minded governing board, and the survey was revised based on their feedback. The final version of the survey, published at the end of June 2025, included

forty-eight questions, including a free-response prompt inviting respondents to share anything else they wanted the survey team to know. To avoid the influence of social expectations or social desirability, all survey responses are treated anonymously.

As mentioned in the introduction, no comparable survey of pop music critics has been conducted in the US in at least the past twenty-five years, if ever. Accordingly, our primary aim was to gather as many responses as possible both within and beyond Critical Minded's and the survey team's networks. We used a nonprobability sampling approach and distributed the survey widely across personal and professional networks, as well as through organizations, publications, and research communities likely to reach music critics. These distribution partners included organizers in events such as the annual Pop Conference* and the 2024 Word: Life symposium,* as well as members of organizations such as the Cultural Studies Association, the Asian Arts Initiative,* Journalists of Color, and others.

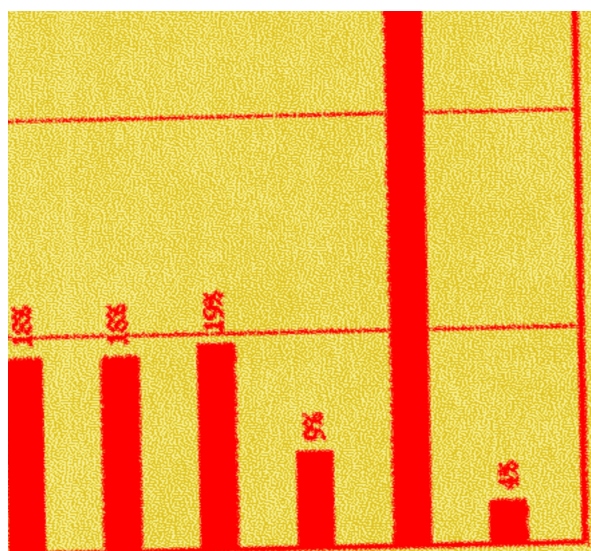
To reach multimedia critics, we conducted targeted outreach to content creators, podcasters, and bloggers, contacting them by email or direct message when necessary. Critic Kieran Press-Reynolds was contracted to help reach more of this population. The survey was sent to 645 individuals and organizations; 211 respondents completed the survey, double the number we had originally hoped to reach. Dr. March conducted the analysis of the survey results.

Part Two of this study is based on twenty-nine in-depth interviews with contemporary pop music critics of color. As with *Topdogs and Underdogs*, the goal was to collect qualitative data in the form of current testimonials from working critics regarding their perspectives and concerns. To ensure a diverse and representative cross section of interviewees, we hired three experienced pop music writers of color to help select participants, develop interview questions, and conduct the interviews. We circulated the contract description through direct emails to contacts and potential

candidates and used both convenience and snowball sampling. After interviewing finalists, we selected Cruz, Mejía, and Morrison based on their interviewing experience and breadth of knowledge across genres, media formats, and areas of criticism.

Working with this research team, we used both convenience and purposive sampling to develop a list of initial interviewees reflecting a broad representation across ethnicity, gender, geographic location, career stage, and primary medium. Each researcher ultimately interviewed eight critics, and project co-lead Wang interviewed the three interviewers plus two additional critics, for a total of twenty-nine interviews. With the exception of the interviewers, Critical Minded provided honoraria to all the interviewees for their time. All conversations were conducted over videoconference, ran approximately sixty to ninety minutes, and drew from a standard set of questions developed by the overall report team. Those questions included the following:

- How long have you been doing music criticism, and how did you discover it as a career?
- How have you navigated the industry, and what crucial relationships, editors, or organizations have supported your development as a critic?
- Do you identify as a critic, and how do you define criticism—music criticism in particular?
- Do you make a living exclusively as a music critic? If not, what income streams support your work? How much do you typically earn per piece, and who is paying you?
- What are the most prominent barriers or challenges you have encountered in pursuing music criticism? Have you experienced difficulties accessing music, concerts, artists, or interviews, and does this access differ by genre or region?
- Have artists, labels, or PR representatives ever attempted to influence your editorial process—for example, by requesting drafts or suggesting changes to your work?
- How have fans or fandom cultures affected what you write about or how you write it?
- Have aspects of your identity—such as race, gender, or sexuality—shaped your opportunities or impacted your experiences as a critic? Do others ever assume you will respond positively to certain artists or recordings because of your background?
- How do you view the future of music criticism, particularly in relation to technology, social media, and AI?
- How can funders like Critical Minded better support critics of color and music criticism more broadly?



LIMITATIONS

Nonprobability sampling carries familiar limits around representativeness, particularly in pop music criticism, which lacks centralized networks. One of our main challenges in both halves of the report was in trying to capture the field’s full diversity of voices, especially those of younger, multimedia critics. This is why we shifted towards purposive sampling to expand the survey’s distribution towards more emergent critics. After these attempts, incoming surveys began to show a higher number of responses from younger critics, suggesting that our attempts had some success but as noted, our sample still leaned more toward older, white critics working in traditional media forms (print/websites). As we discuss in the interview section of the report,

Researchers were encouraged to ask additional questions as time allowed. All interviews were recorded by the interviewers and transcribed by them using Descript or Otter.ai. Transcripts were reviewed and corrected by the interviewers who also wrote a one-page summary of each interview. Report co-lead Sharon Mizota used the summaries for context in coding the transcripts in Dedoose, generating the qualitative data that served as the basis for the analysis conducted by Mizota and Wang.

Importantly, all interviewees have been anonymized in order to encourage candor in speaking on potentially sensitive topics around race and gender. For context, we usually refer to interviewees by their level of experience—early-career (zero to five years of writing), mid-career (six to fifteen years), and senior (fifteen-plus years)—as well as their primary medium for criticism—print versus multimedia—but race/ethnicity/gender descriptors are only used when relevant to provide context. Likewise, as people’s testimonials often included mentions of specific publications, editors, and other critics, we made case-by-case decisions to redact certain names if we felt that their inclusion would compromise the anonymity of the interviewee. However, this has the unintended effect of making larger publications and platforms—such as *Rolling Stone*, NPR, or *Pitchfork*—more likely to be named compared to smaller publications.

it may also be that younger critics don’t identify with the term “critic” itself and thus, may not have felt that the survey applied to them.

This same challenge impacted our attempts to choose interviewee subjects for the report’s second half: many of the younger, multimedia critics did not respond to interview invitations, suggesting limited ties between multimedia critics and the print critics who were the majority of our research team. In the past, generational and genre differences contributed to these communication gaps, but emerging platform-specific ecosystems may play an increasing role in those gaps now. We recommend that future researchers consider these factors in developing their samples.

PART ONE: THE SURVEY

AS PART OF THE SYSTEMATIC analysis conducted for *Topdogs and Underdogs*, we identified a handful of previous studies/surveys that addressed the working experiences and conditions of other kinds of cultural critics. However, though pop music critics have long been surveyed for “best of” lists like the *Village Voice*’s annual “Pazz and Jop” poll, we could not locate any studies in which the pop music critic community itself was the primary subject. As such, we created and distributed what we believe is the first national survey in at least twenty-five years that explores the work life of pop music critics based in the United States and/

or who primarily write for US-based publications. As discussed in the “Limitations” part of the Methodologies section, our use of convenience and purposive sampling means that our respondents can’t be assumed to be a representative sample. Nonetheless, we feel that this survey, especially in the absence of other research, constitutes a valuable first step in engaging with the American pop critic community. Based on over 200 validated responses we received, Dr. Lucy March analyzed both the quantitative and qualitative response results, which we have grouped into three broad, thematic areas:

1.

Who the critics are and how they work:
demographics, training, roles, outlets, forms

2.

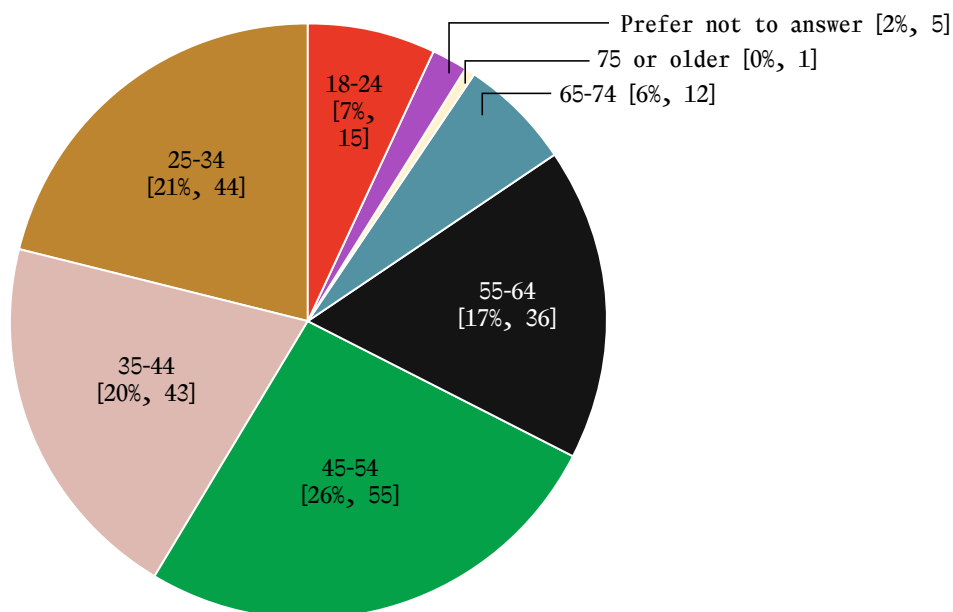
The challenges they face:
economic precarity, social media, fandom, AI

3.

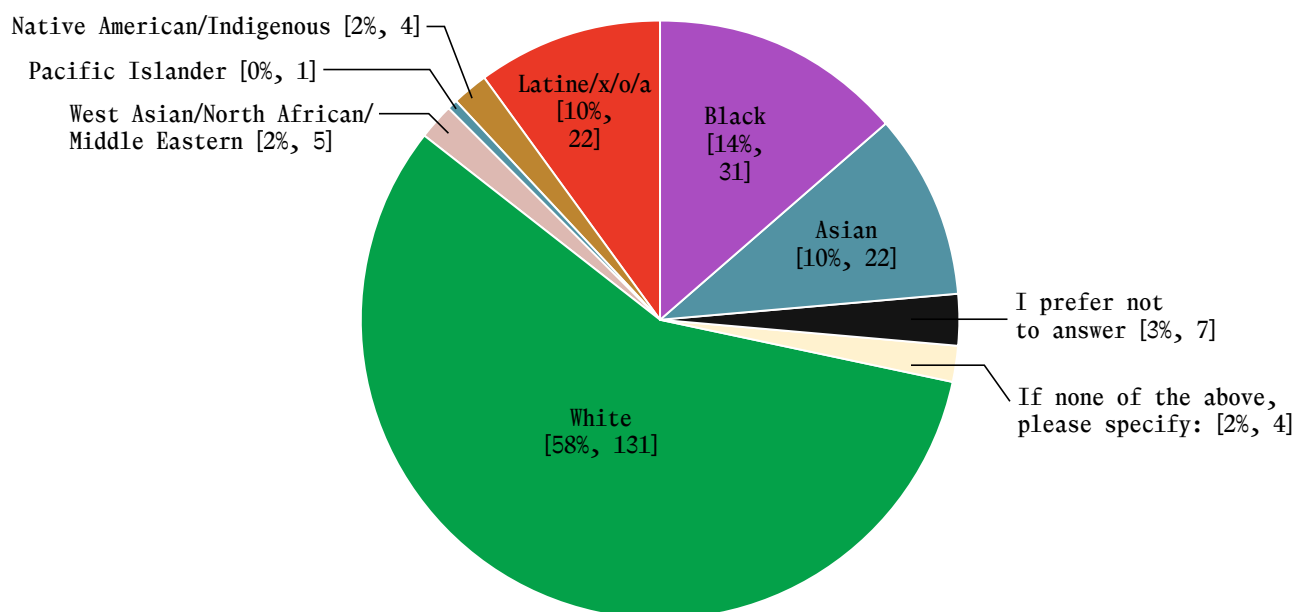
The future of music criticism:
adaptation, innovation, intergenerational change

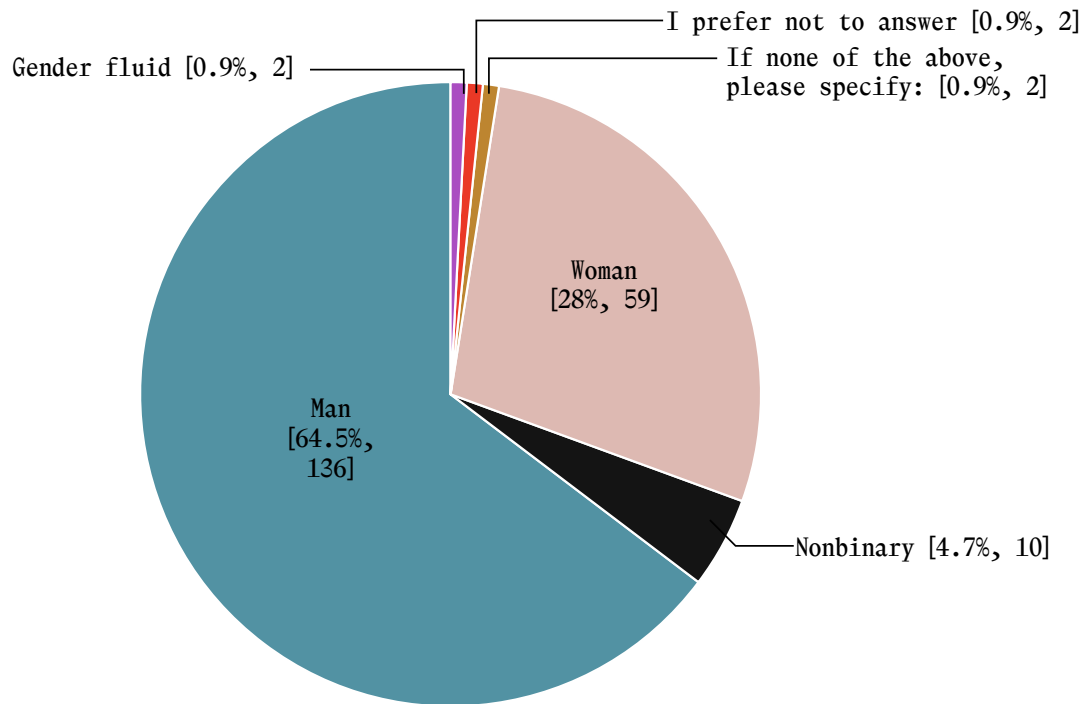
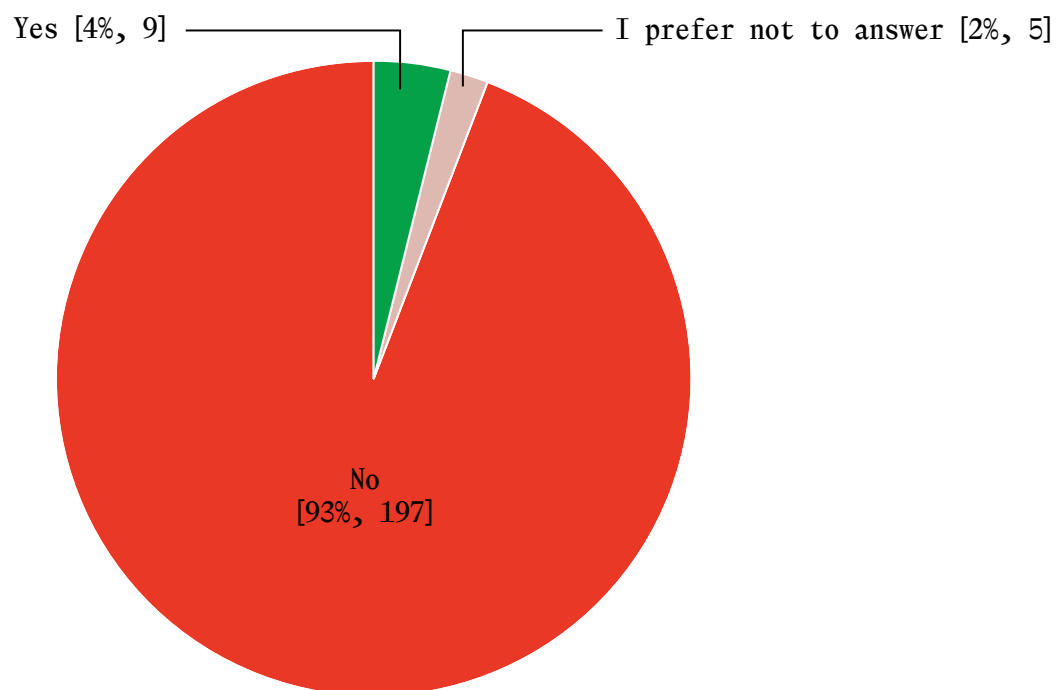
1 WHO THE CRITICS ARE AND HOW THEY WORK

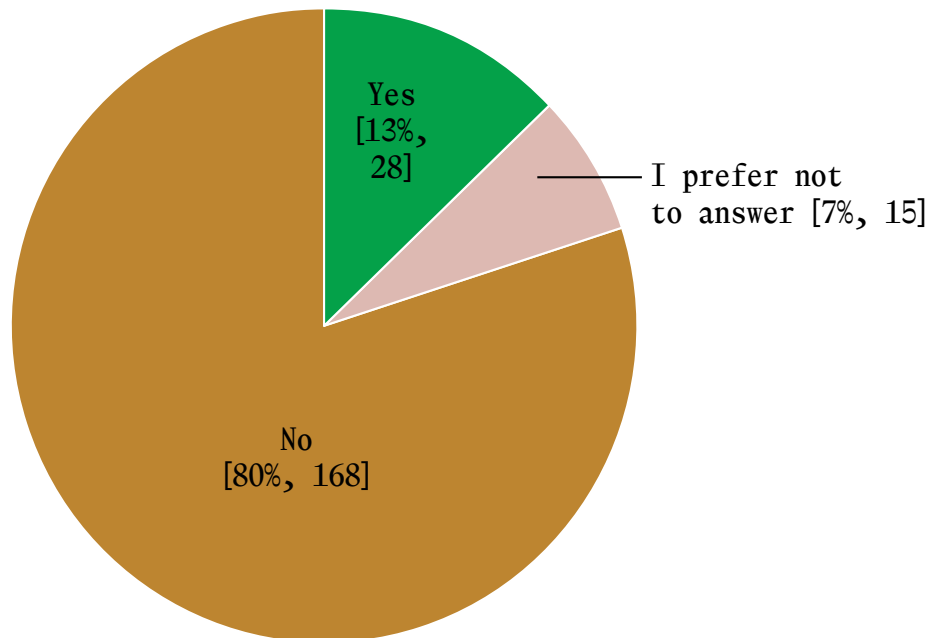
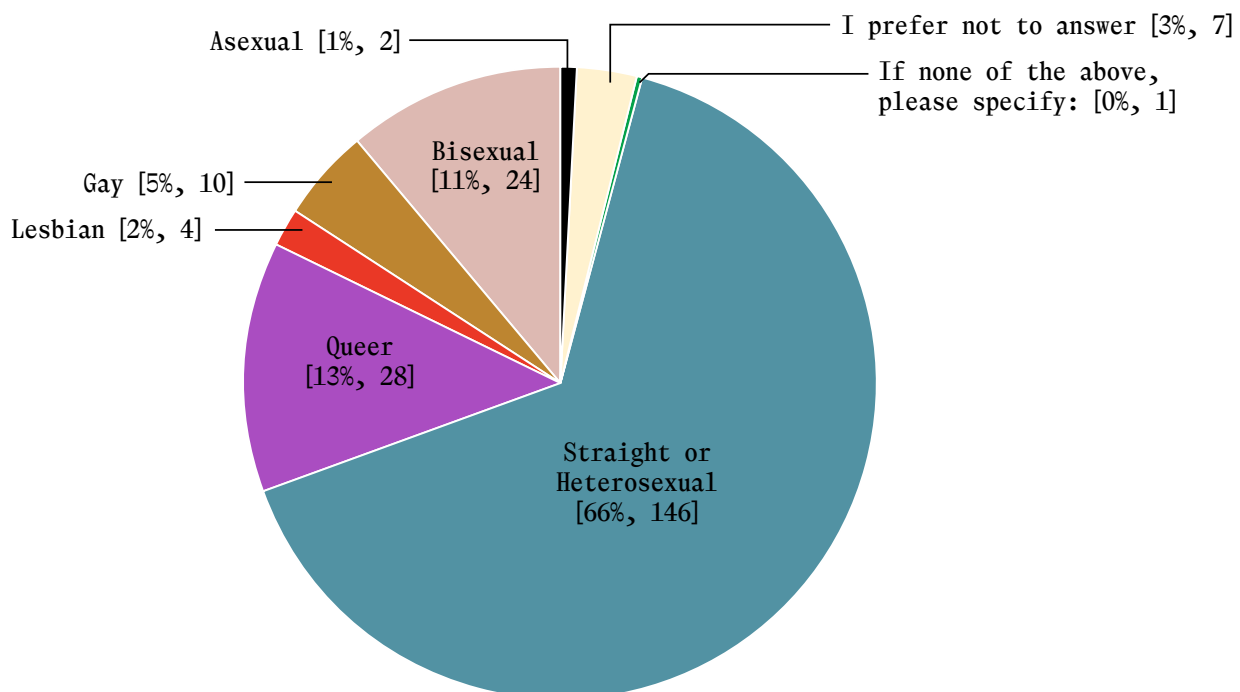
WHAT IS YOUR AGE, IN YEARS?



WHAT IS YOUR RACIAL IDENTITY? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR GENDER IDENTITY?DO YOU IDENTIFY AS TRANSGENDER?

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A MEMBER OF THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY?HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND/OR SEXUAL IDENTITY? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

Demographically, our respondents were predominantly white and male, as well as highly educated, professionally experienced, and meaningfully diverse in terms of sexual orientation and disability representation. However, younger critics were more likely to identify as non-male, LGBTQ+, and in some cases, were more likely to identify as critics of color, suggesting generational differences within the critical community.

In terms of racial and ethnic background, most of our respondents (62%) identify as white, followed by Black (14%), Asian (10%), and Latine (10%). Age-wise, the distribution showed a fairly even split: nearly half of our sample (49%) is forty-five or older, while approximately the same amount (48%) is forty-four or younger. We initially assumed that the younger categories would have higher numbers of critics of color, but it was the 45–54 age group with the highest proportion (52%), though this may reflect sampling dynamics rather than a broader national trend.⁹

Regarding gender identity, nearly two-thirds (64%) of our respondents identified as male,

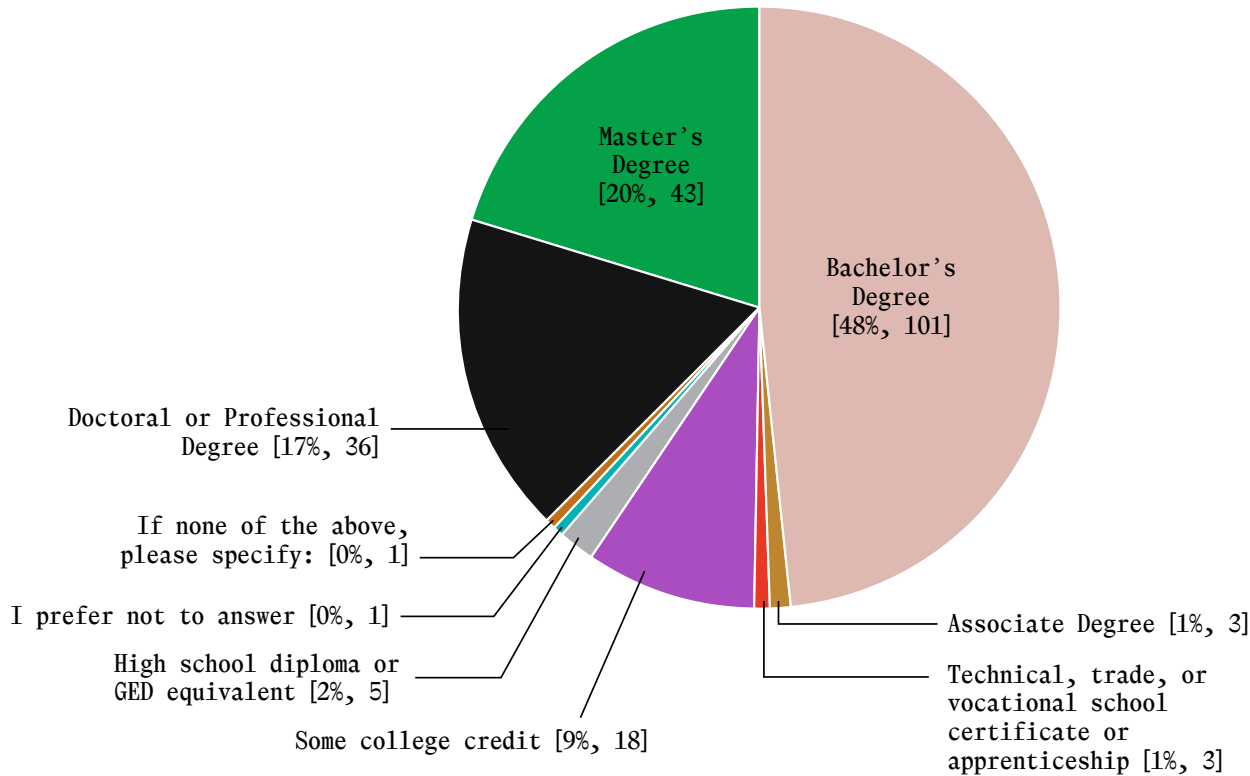
while less than a third (28%) identified as female. Six percent described themselves as gender fluid, nonbinary, or not described by the gender categories provided. Four percent of the critics identified as transgender. Over two-thirds (69%) identified as straight or heterosexual, while 13% described their sexual identity as queer, 11% as bisexual, 5% as gay, and 2% as lesbian. Thirteen percent identified as a member of the disability community.¹⁰

The more “traditional” image of the music critic represented the largest proportion of our sample in terms of race and gender, with over a third (37%) of respondents identifying as white males, though male critics of color made up the second largest proportion at 27%. However, comparing the younger and older cohorts of these critics suggests that the demographics of the profession, as reflected in this group, have seen some change over time: critics forty-four or younger were significantly more likely to identify as a gender other than male, as well as a sexuality other than straight, compared to critics forty-five or older.

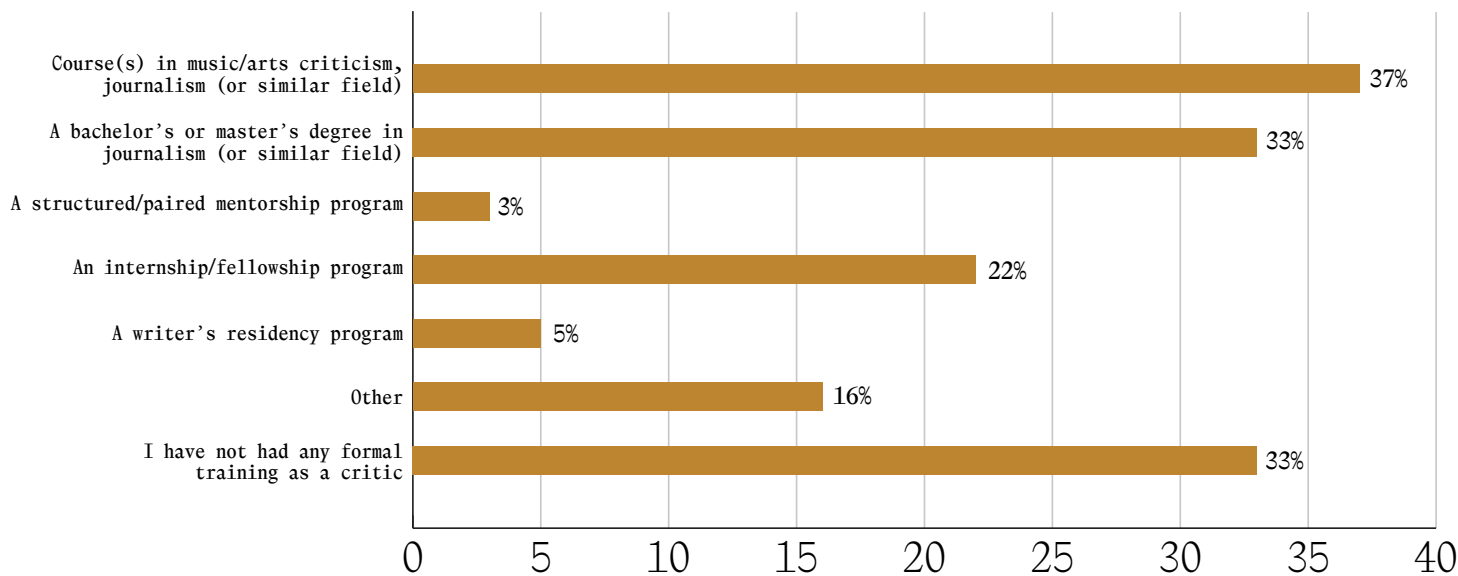
⁹The fact that the 45–54 age group had the most critics of color could, for example, point to a form of survival bias in which music writers of that generation had the greatest success in creating some kind of sustainable career in criticism. Especially as that age group coincides with a significant increase in interest around African American and Latine pop music styles from the mid-1990s through mid-2000s, it would stand to reason that there may have been more opportunities for Black and Brown critics to have established footholds that continue to allow those critics to continue writing today.

¹⁰Smaller racial, gender, and sexual identity categories—as well as respondents who selected “prefer not to answer”—accounted for the remaining percentages across these demographic questions.

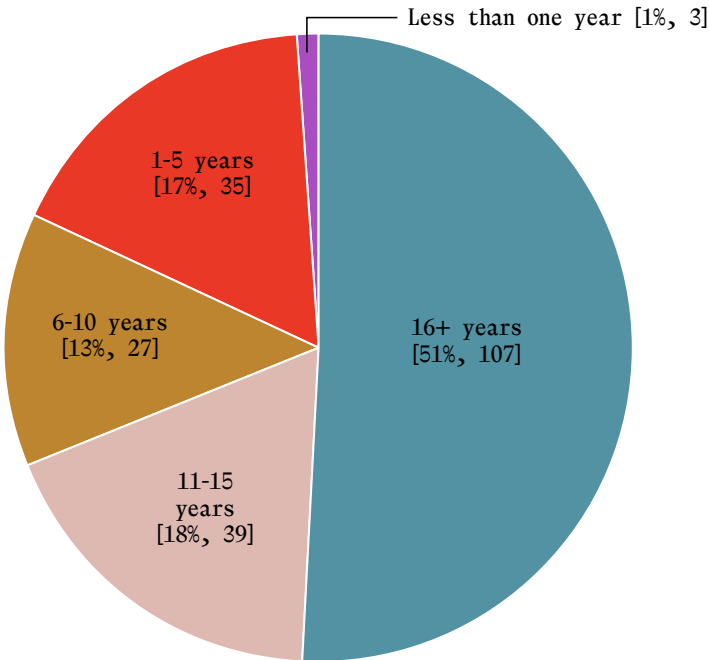
WHAT EDUCATIONAL LEVEL HAVE YOU COMPLETED?



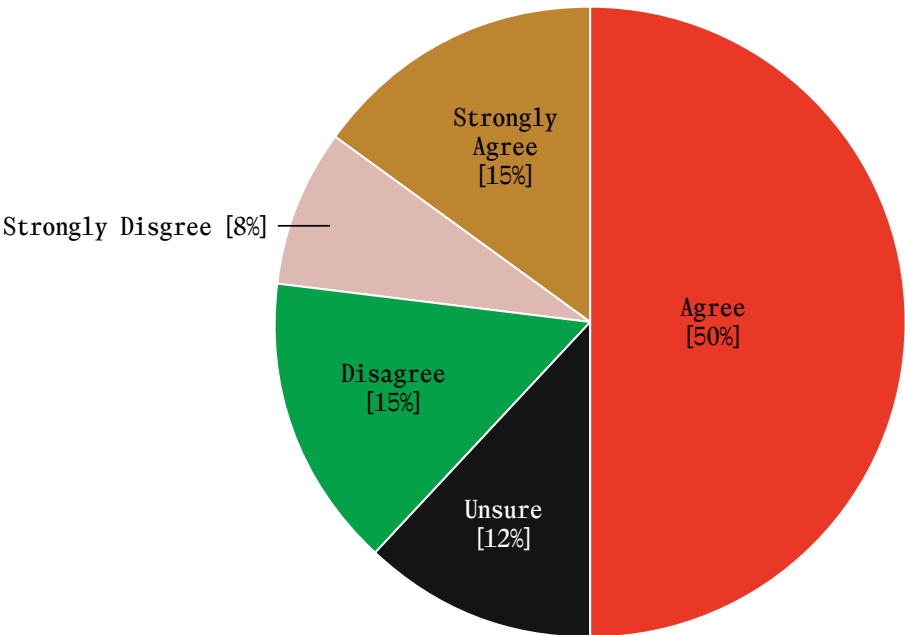
WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES OF FORMAL TRAINING—IF ANY—DO YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING MUSIC CRITICISM?



I HAVE MENTORS IN MUSIC CRITICISM THAT I CAN GO TO FOR ADVICE



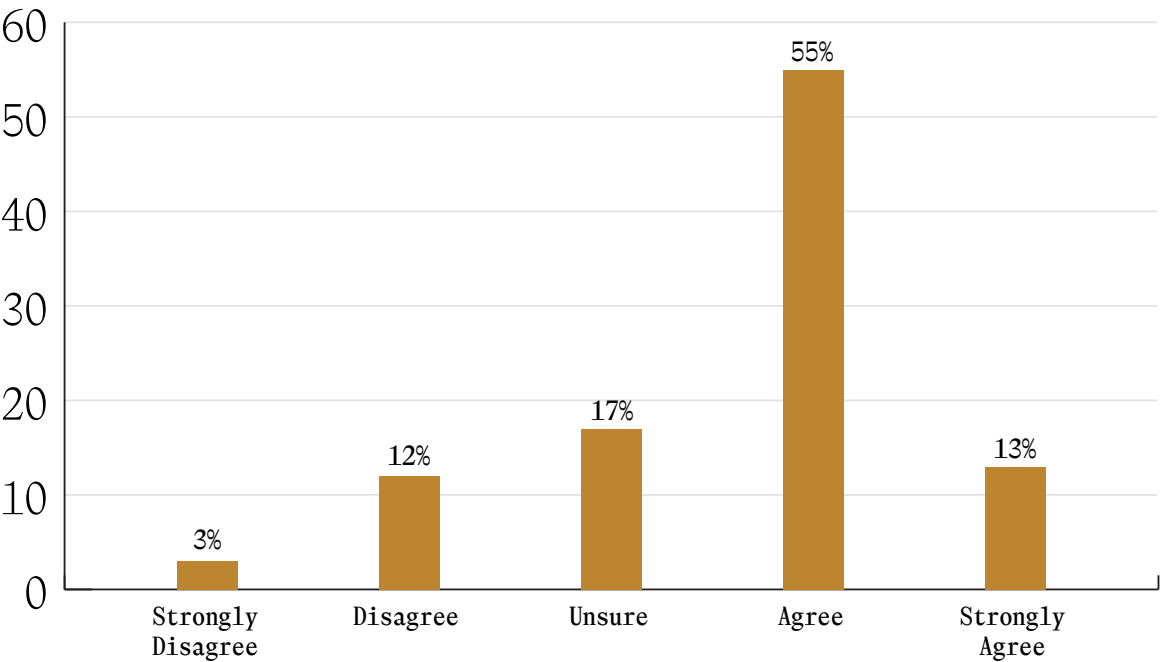
On the whole, our critics have a great deal of experience in their craft: over half (51%) have been doing music criticism for sixteen or more years, while less than a fifth (18%) have been doing it for five years or less.¹¹ Similarly, our group of critics is highly educated and has engaged in several forms of training to prepare for careers as music critics. Nearly half (48%) have completed a bachelor's

degree, and well over a third (37%) have completed a master's, doctoral, or professional degree. More unexpected is that two-thirds (67%) of our respondents indicated having received some kind of formal training as a critic, including coursework in music/arts criticism or journalism (37%), degrees in journalism or similar fields (33%), or participation in internship/fellowship programs (22%).¹²

¹¹This is another case where our sampling methods may have created a bias toward more experienced respondents, as they are easier to reach via our convenience/purposive sampling strategies.

¹²The percentage of people with degrees in journalism (or similar fields) was higher than anticipated since historically, such programs rarely focus on arts/culture journalism, let alone criticism. Future researchers may want to disaggregate journalism degrees by level (BA, MA, etc.) as well as ask respondents to specify which "similar fields" their degrees were in.

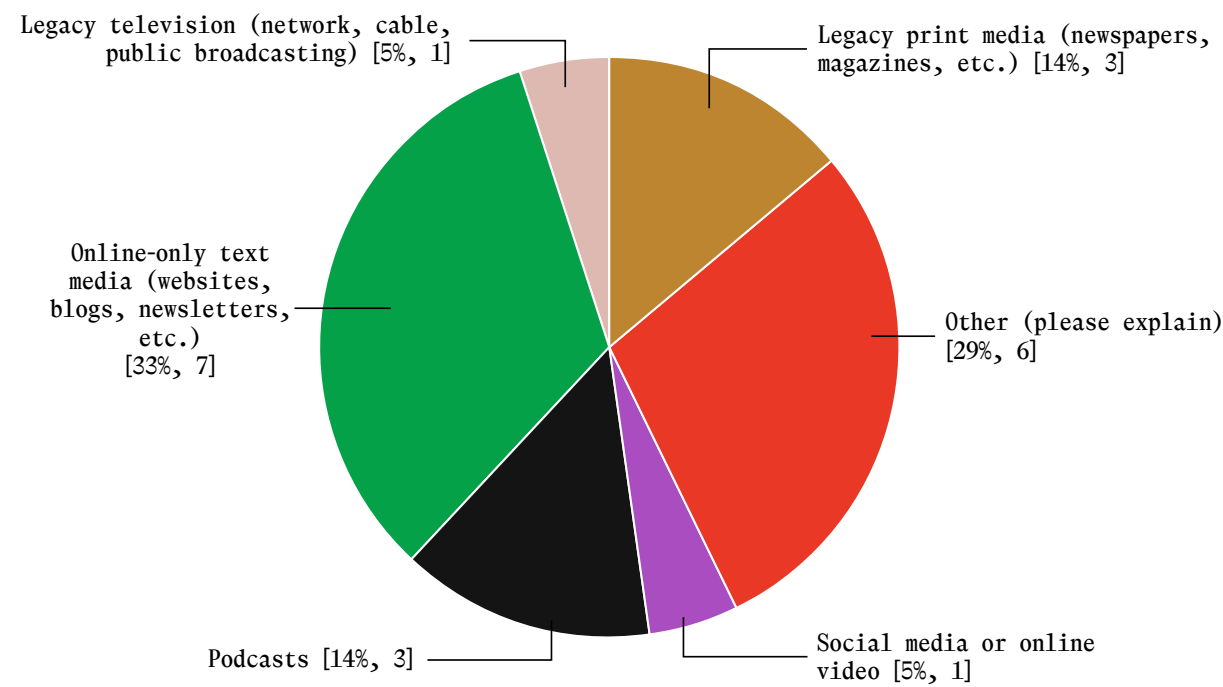
I AM ABLE TO RELATE TO MY COLLEAGUES IN MUSIC CRITICISM



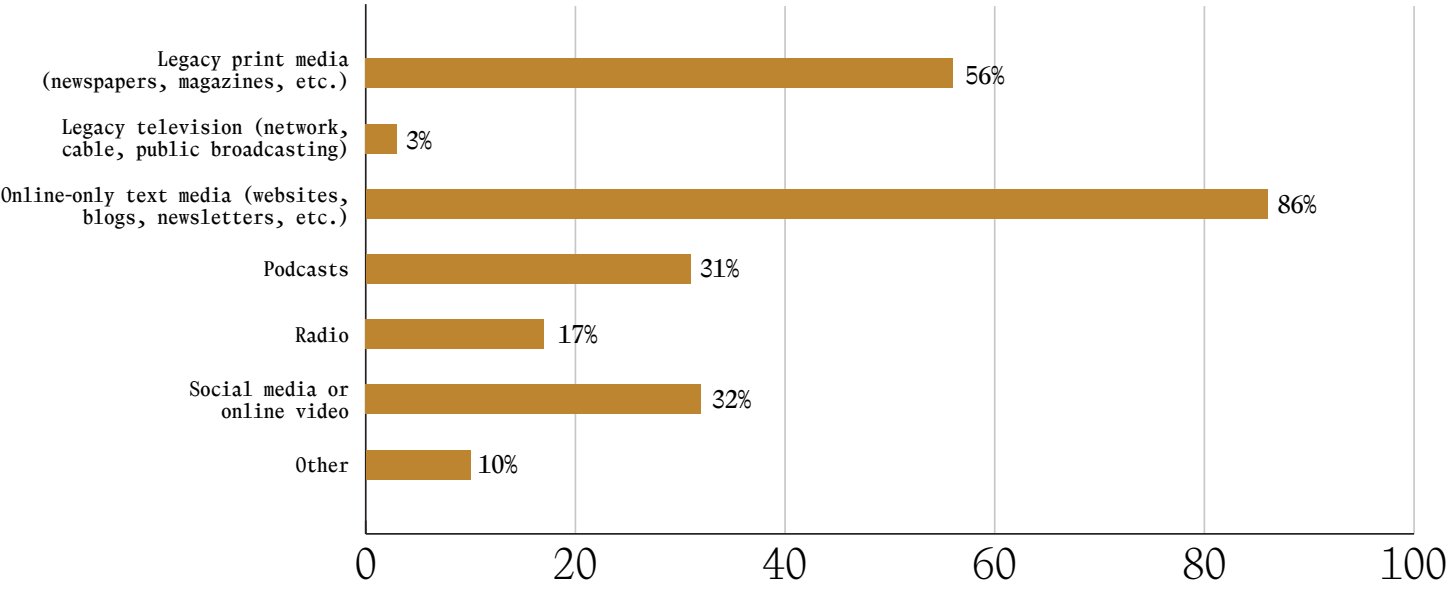
Beyond formal education and training, critics described a range of mentorship experiences that have shaped their development. While the survey data was anonymous, critics described senior theses written under the direction of a professor, mentorship by graduate school advisors, and internships at media companies under the guidance of senior colleagues. Companies and outlets where the critics held internships included *Billboard*, *CREEM*, *The*

Fader,* *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Magazine*, *NPR Music*, *Out*, *Paste*, *Pitchfork* Fellowship, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *VIBE*, *Village Voice*, *Vox*, and local radio stations and newspapers. While very few critics (5%) participated in writers' or residency programs, multiple critics named Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Asian Arts Initiative's Sound Type residency, and the Sewanee Writers' Conference as examples of such programs.

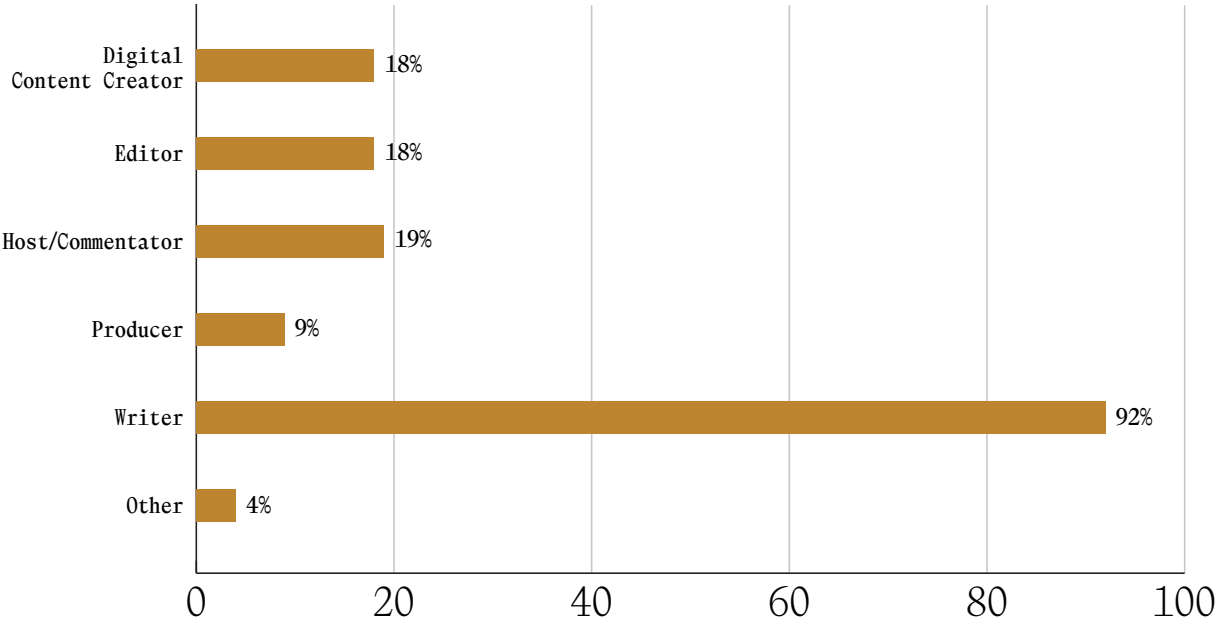
IF YOU ARE CURRENTLY WORKING IN A FULL-TIME STAFF POSITION IN MUSIC CRITICISM, WHAT KIND OF OUTLET DO YOU WORK FOR?



WHAT KIND OF OUTLET(S) DOES YOUR UNPAID, PART-TIME, OR FREELANCE MUSIC CRITICISM PRIMARILY APPEAR IN? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



CURRENTLY, WHAT IS YOUR PRIMARY ROLE(S) IN MUSIC CRITICISM? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



Our critics are in the often beleaguered business of words, and they know how to wear multiple professional hats. A vast majority of the critics (92%) described their current primary role in criticism as a writer, while the other options they were able to select saw a fairly even spread across the board, including host/commentator (19%), editor (18%), and digital content creator (17%), with a smaller percentage selecting producer (9%). A substantial number of our critics possess professional competencies in multiple areas, with nearly four in ten critics (39%) selecting multiple primary roles. However, there are some notable trends on who is more likely to occupy more than one role. Overwhelmingly, it was respondents of color who held “dual” roles as writer/content creator, writer/host/commentator, and writer/producer compared to white respondents. This may suggest that respondents of color either have

to juggle multiple roles out of financial necessity and/or they are more likely to engage in less traditional approaches to music criticism in which these multiple hats are more common— such as podcasting and social media content creation— but the explanations behind why people hold multiple roles is beyond this survey’s scope. Regardless, for people who identified as both writer/content creator, there were also very significant differences based on both age and education. Respondents forty-four and younger who held less than a bachelor’s degree were nearly four times more likely to identify as both writer and content creator compared to the same age group who held a bachelor’s degree or beyond. That difference vanishes for those forty-five or older, suggesting that younger writers, with less education, are more likely to be involved in social media content creation.

¹³We did not find statistically significant differences within our pool regarding who was more likely to work a full-time *staff* position based on race, age, education level, or gender identity, suggesting that while these positions may be scarce, they are equally scarce across the major demographic categories. We also did not ask respondents if they worked for outlets that have full-time staff positions.

Another unsurprising, though still sobering, result is that only 10% of our respondents indicated that they worked in a *full-time staff position*, arguably the most desirable kind of position for work/economic stability. Within that specific sub-sample, the types of outlets people work for run the gamut, with a third (33%) working for websites, nearly another third (28%) selecting “other” (with several of these respondents noting that they worked full time as academics), 14% working for print outlets (newspapers, magazines, etc.), and 14% employed full-time by podcasts.

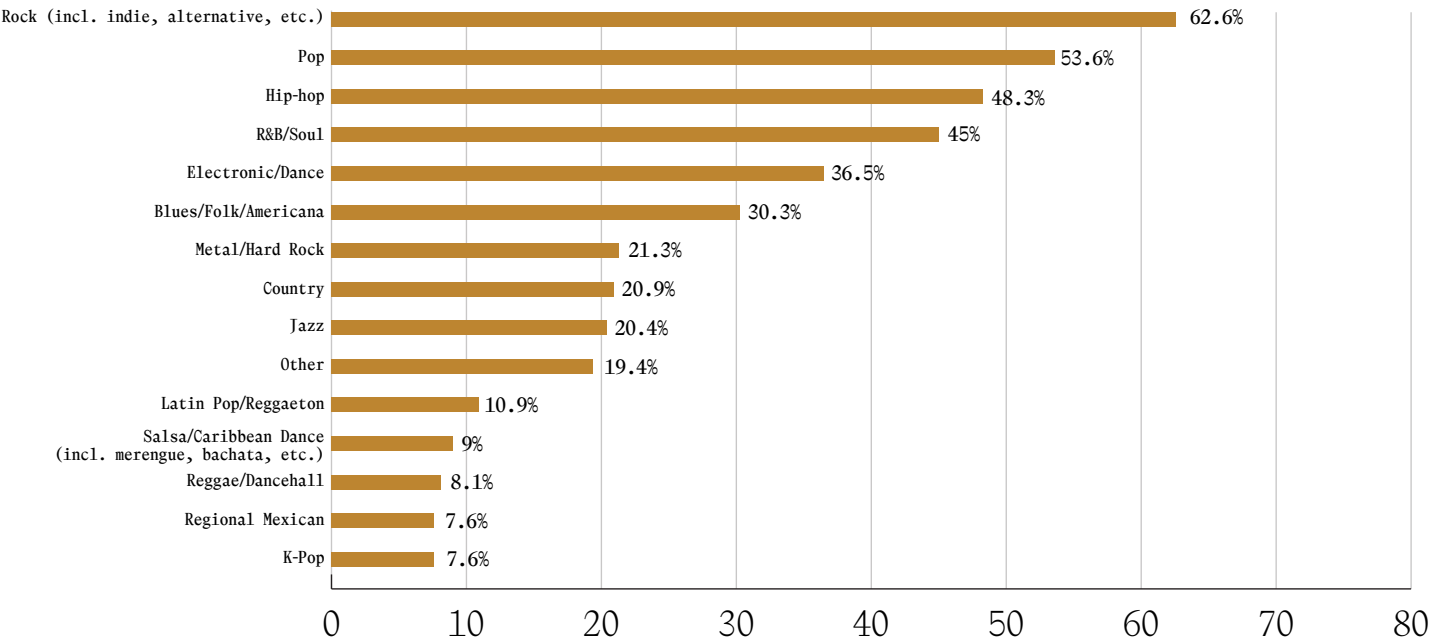
Notably, while 33% of our overall survey pool reported making a full-time living from music writing/criticism, whether on staff or as freelancers, that number shrinks to closer to 25% among respondents of color, with only 8% from that population reporting being in staff positions and roughly twice as many working as full-time

freelancers.¹³ This suggests that critics of color have fewer opportunities to pursue music writing as a full-time vocation.

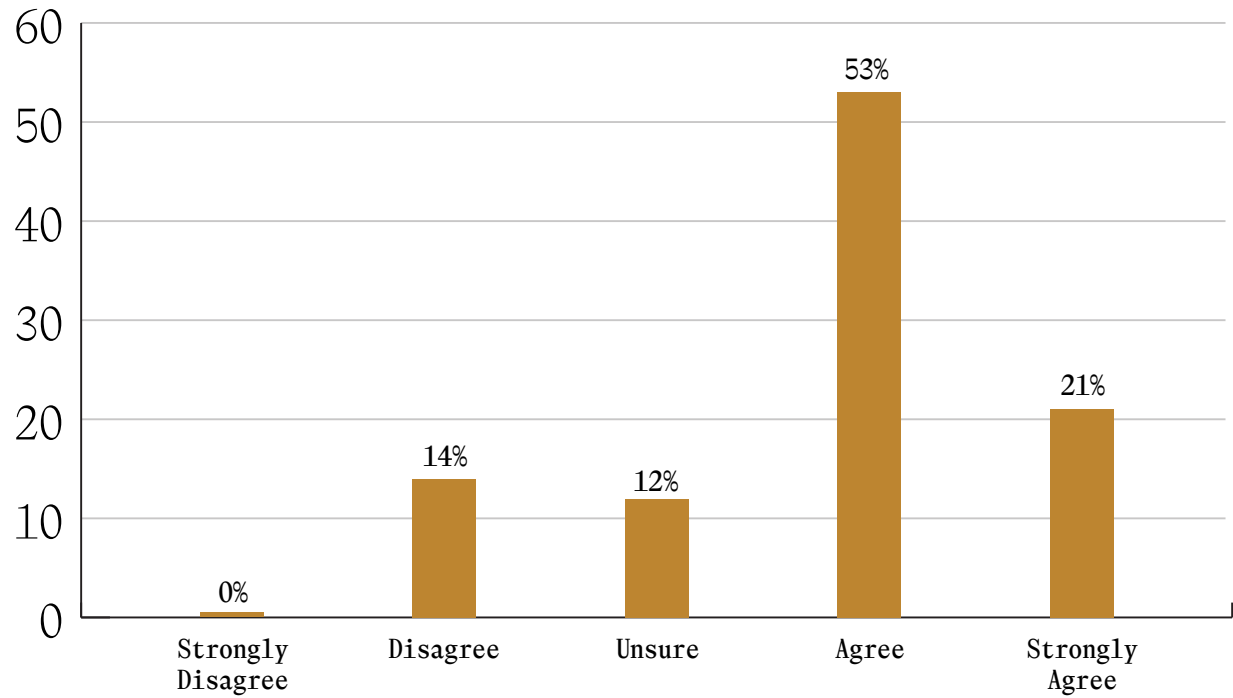
For those working part time, as a freelancer, or doing unpaid work, an overwhelming majority (86%) reported that their work appeared in *online-only* outlets. The fact that far more of these respondents report writing for online publications versus traditional print outlets reflects the major shift in the publishing industry from print to online formats over the past twenty-five years.

Over half (55%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they need to create criticism using different forms of media (text, audio, video, etc.) in order to be successful. Perhaps not surprisingly, younger critics were far more likely to feel this way, with 89% of respondents forty-four or younger *strongly* agreeing with this statement.

WHAT MUSICAL STYLES OR GENRES DO YOU MOSTLY COVER?
(SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



I AM ABLE TO COVER A WIDE VARIETY OF MUSICAL GENRES AND STYLES IN MY CRITICISM

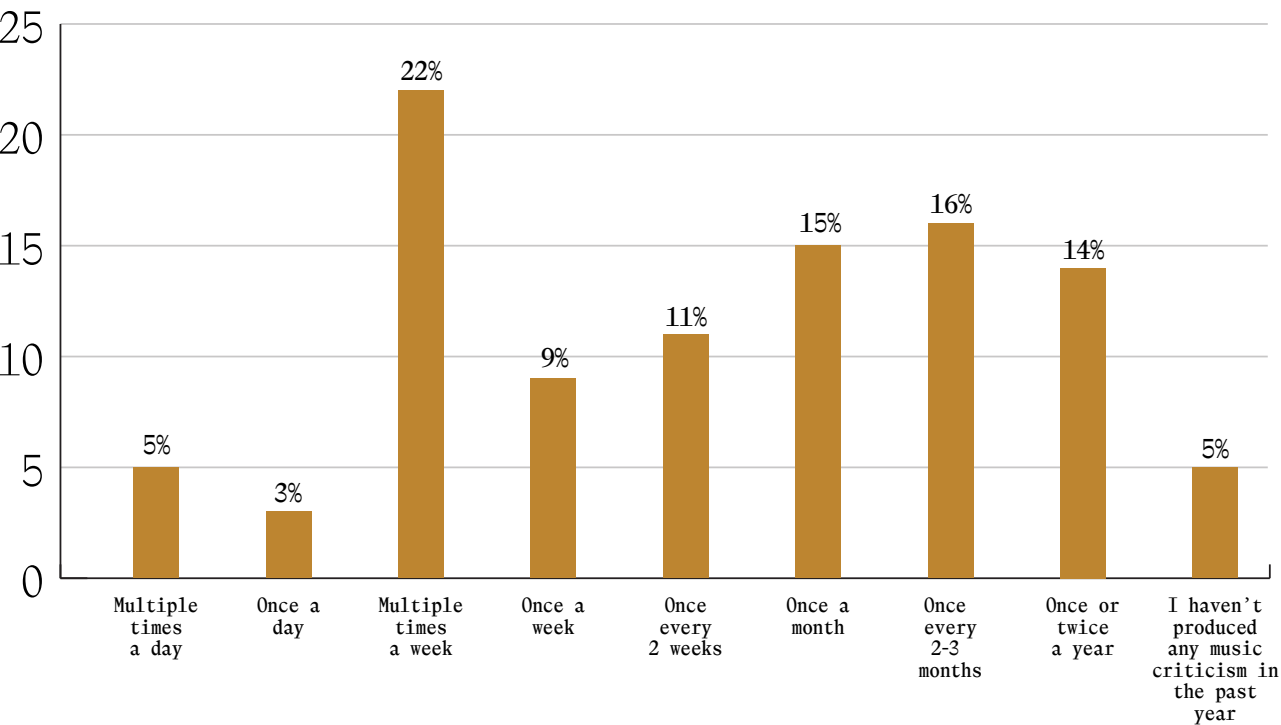


Our critics cover an incredibly broad range of genres in their criticism, with the most popular genres selected being rock (including indie, alternative, etc.) (63%), pop (54%), hip-hop (48%), and R&B/soul (45%). There was a fairly even spread of coverage across the popular music genres that were listed in this question: of the fifteen specified, only four genres (reggae/dancehall, regional Mexican, K-pop, and salsa/Caribbean dance) were selected by less than 10% of the critics.

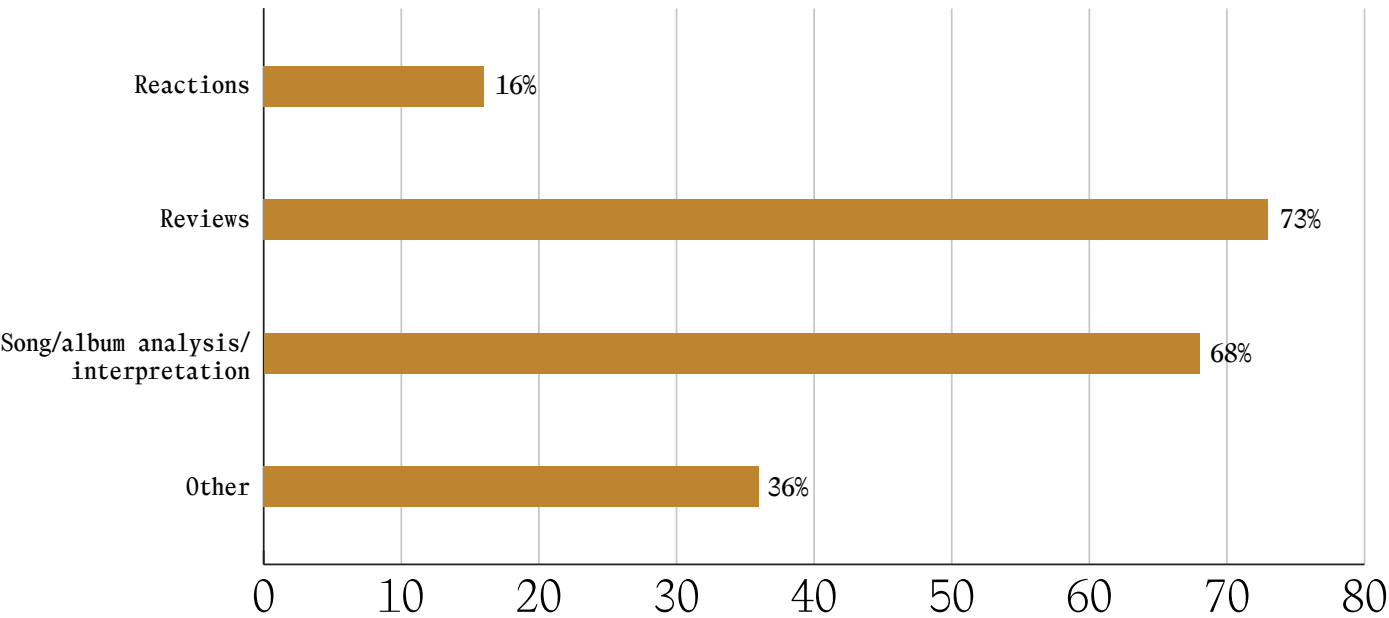
The critics are also not limited in the musical styles they cover. A vast majority (86%) selected more than one genre, and over two-thirds (68%)

selected three or more. The most common two-genre combinations include rock/pop, R&B/hip-hop, and rock/electronic, while the most common three-genre combinations include rock/pop/electronic, hip-hop/R&B/pop, and rock/Americana/country. Genres mentioned in write-ins included experimental/ambient, Afrobeat/pop/house, bluegrass, grime, gospel, and Asian pop styles including J-pop and C-pop. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the respondents/critics agreed or strongly agreed that they can cover a wide range of genres and styles, while not a single respondent selected that they strongly disagree with this statement.

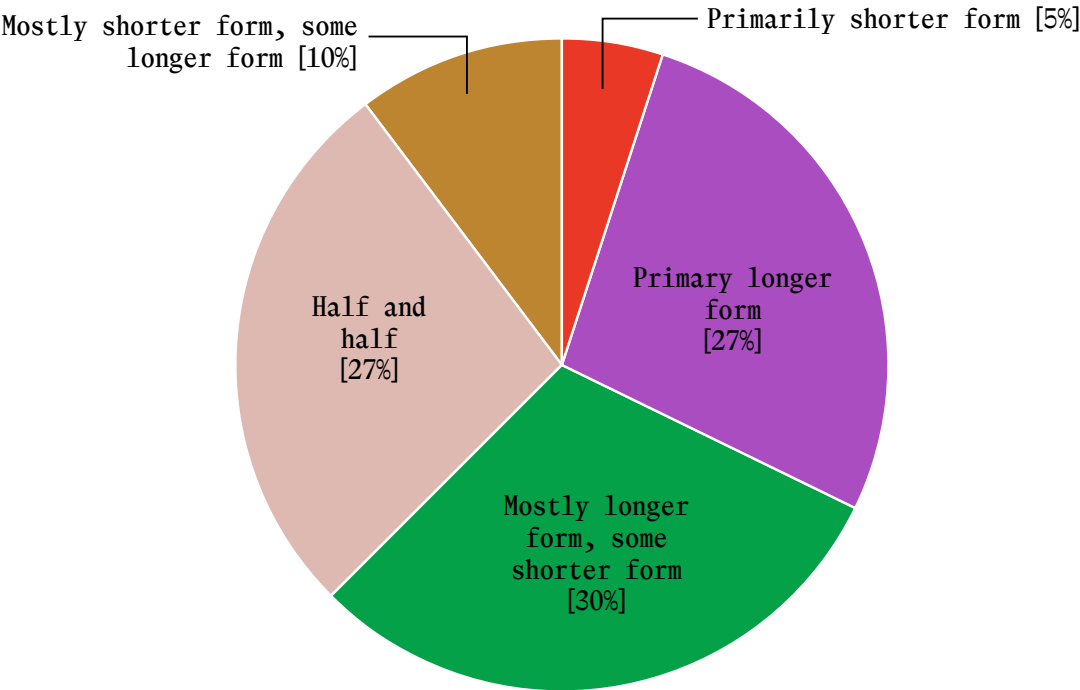
IN THE PAST YEAR, HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU PRODUCED MUSIC CRITICISM? THIS CAN INCLUDE CRITICISM FOR PROFESSIONAL MEDIA OUTLETS, PERSONAL NEWSLETTERS, SOCIAL MEDIA, ETC.



WHAT TYPE(S) OF MUSIC CRITICISM DO YOU PRIMARILY CREATE? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



DO YOU PRIMARILY CREATE SHORTER OR LONGER PIECES OF CRITICISM?
SHORTER FORM = CAPSULE REVIEWS, 1-2 MIN. VIDEOS, ETC. LONGER FORM =
ESSAYS, PODCAST EPISODES, 5+ MINUTE VIDEOS, ETC.



¹⁴ Re-spondents also mentioned interviews, historical storytelling/retrospectives, artist profiles, and scene reports though these are usually considered forms of music writing but not necessarily criticism.

This group of critics is incredibly productive. Almost all (95%) of the critics reported that they have produced some form of criticism in the past year, including for professional media outlets, personal newsletters, or social media, while four in ten (39%) are producing criticism once a week or more. Moreover, more than half (57%) report that they mostly or primarily produce longer form criticism, like essays and podcast episodes, as opposed to shorter form criticism such as capsule reviews. Younger critics were slightly more likely to report that they create primarily shorter form content compared to older critics,

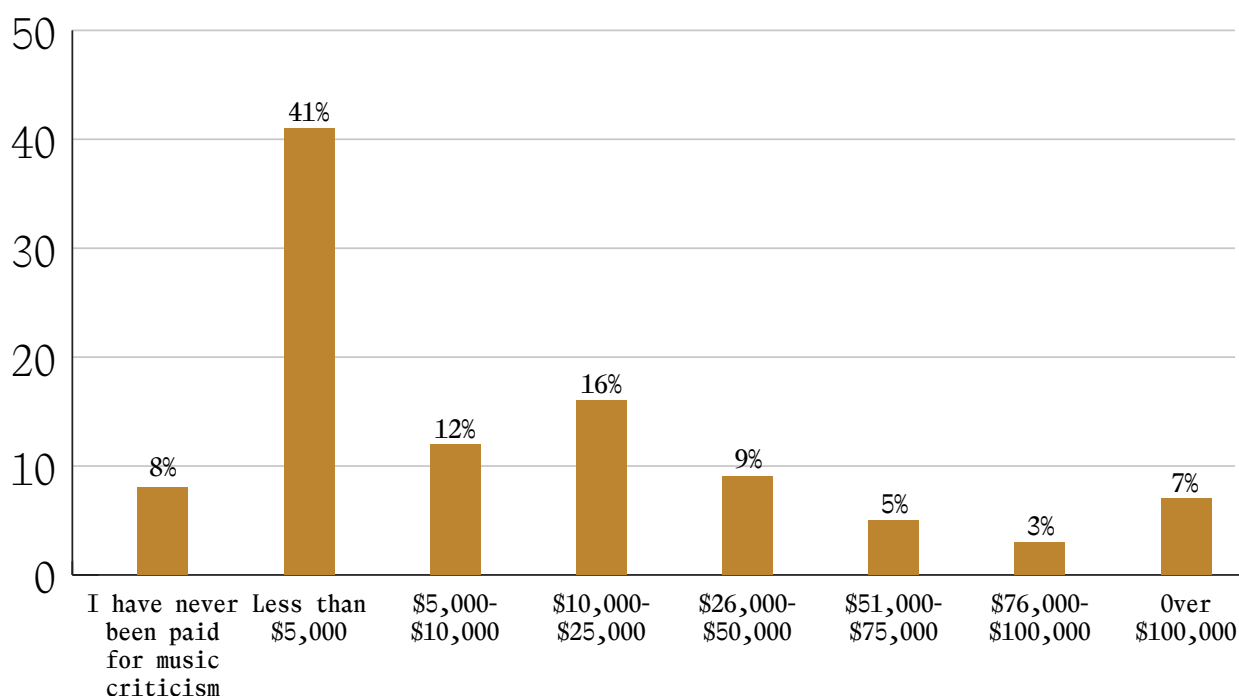
with 71% of those responding as such being 44 or younger. These critics produce criticism in a wide variety of forms. While nearly three-quarters (73%) of the critics produce reviews as part of their criticism, and over two-thirds (68%) create song/album analysis/interpretations, over a third (36%) of the critics produce criticism falling outside of these two categories. The other styles of criticism mentioned by multiple critics include: playlist curation/recommendations, chart analysis, cultural criticism, features, creative non-fiction, academic articles, and academic books.¹⁴

2 CHALLENGES FACING POP MUSIC CRITICS

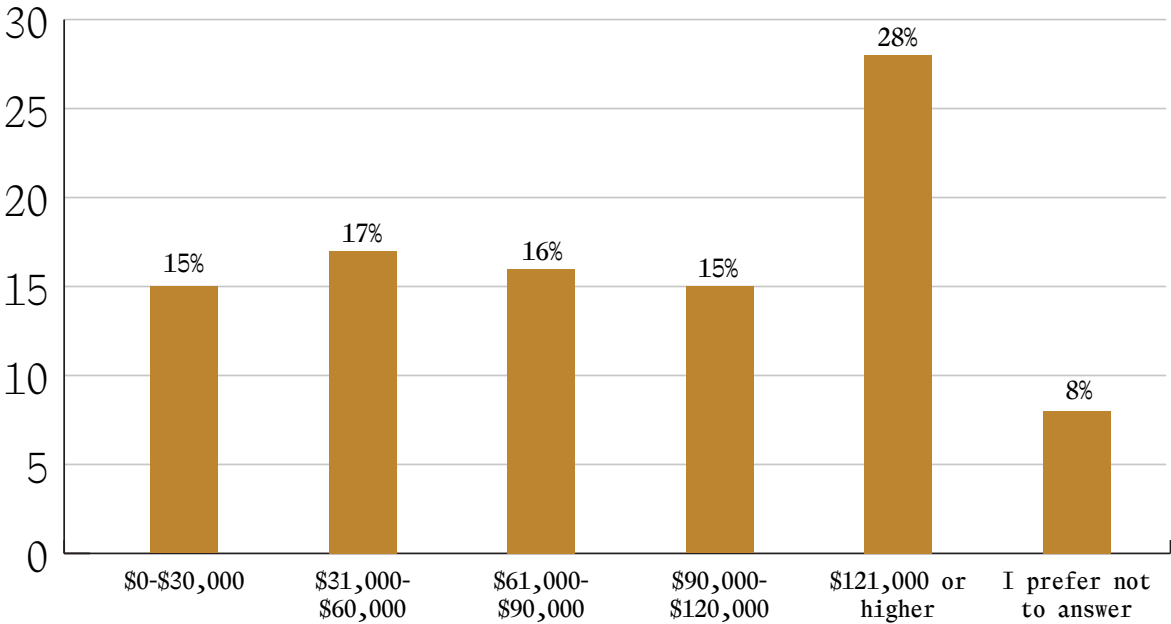
This section addresses the significant systemic barriers facing critics in their careers and opportunities. While economic precarity is a serious concern, it is not the only one that our respondents highlighted.

INCOME, WORKING CONDITIONS, AND ECONOMIC PRECARITY

HOW MUCH DO YOU TYPICALLY EARN IN A YEAR FROM MUSIC CRITICISM?



**WHAT IS YOUR ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME, INCLUDING NON-CRITICISM
RELATED INCOME?**



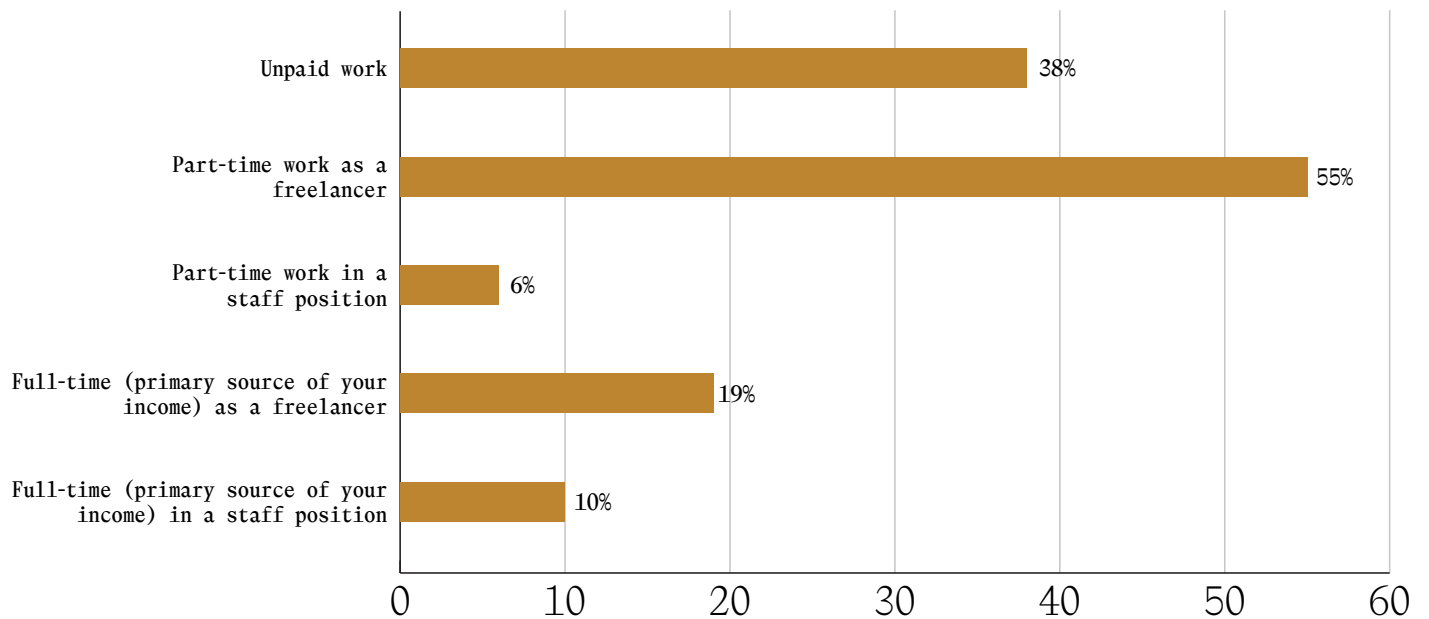
¹⁵Overall, a higher level of education correlated to higher, overall household income but we did not see a clear correlation between education level—or years of writing experience—with what people reported earning from *writing criticism*. The only exception is that those who reported 16+ years of experience were only *slightly* less likely to make \$5,000 a year or less from criticism compared to those with less experience.

As anticipated, for the majority of respondents, music criticism does not pay a living wage.

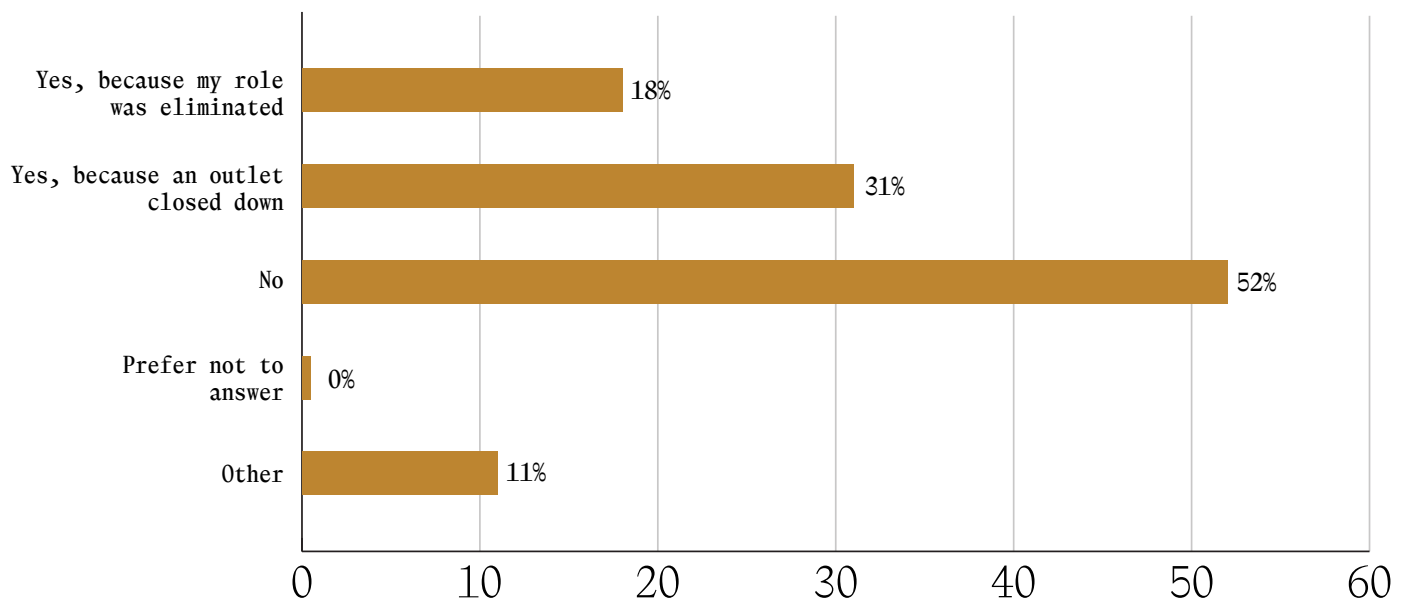
Our respondents are largely unable to make a living strictly from criticism income, regardless of their education level or years of experience.¹⁵ Overall, more than two out of five (41%) critics reported earning less than \$5,000 a year from their criticism work, and over three-quarters (77%) reported earning less than \$25,000. Concerningly, almost one out of ten respondents (8%) reported that they had never been paid for music criticism.

Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) live in households earning \$60,000 a year or less—particularly notable given that many reside in high-cost cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Toronto. The survey did not capture household size or expenses, which could further compound precarity. As one critic wrote, “I am very lucky to have a staff job in a relatively stable situation, and even with that in mind... I can’t make a living as a critic (at least not with three kids and a mortgage).” These findings underscore that most critics cannot rely on criticism as their primary source of income.

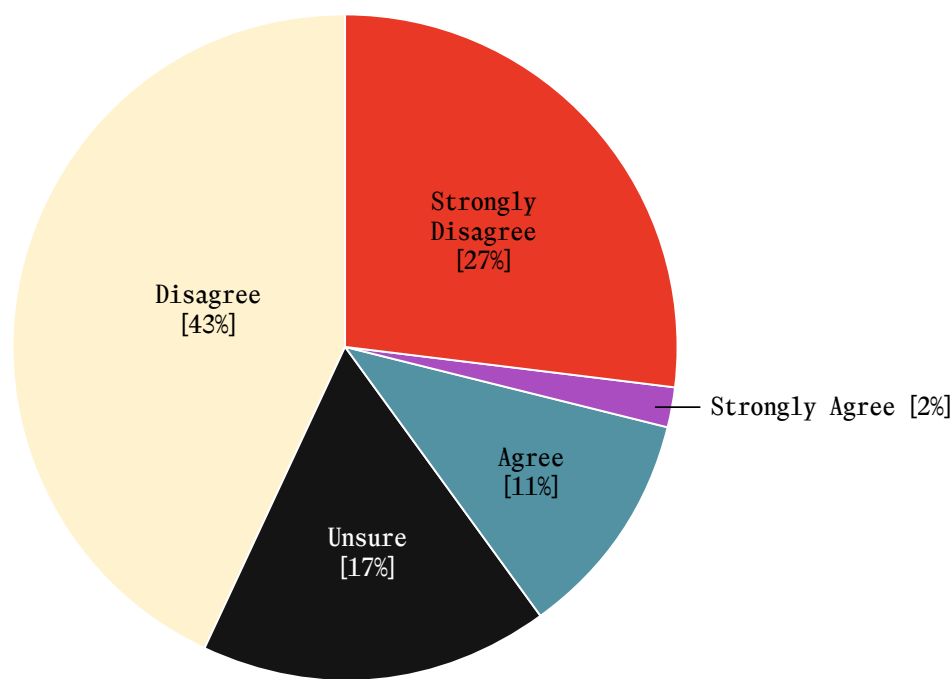
CURRENTLY, UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS ARE YOU PRODUCING MUSIC
CRITICISM? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



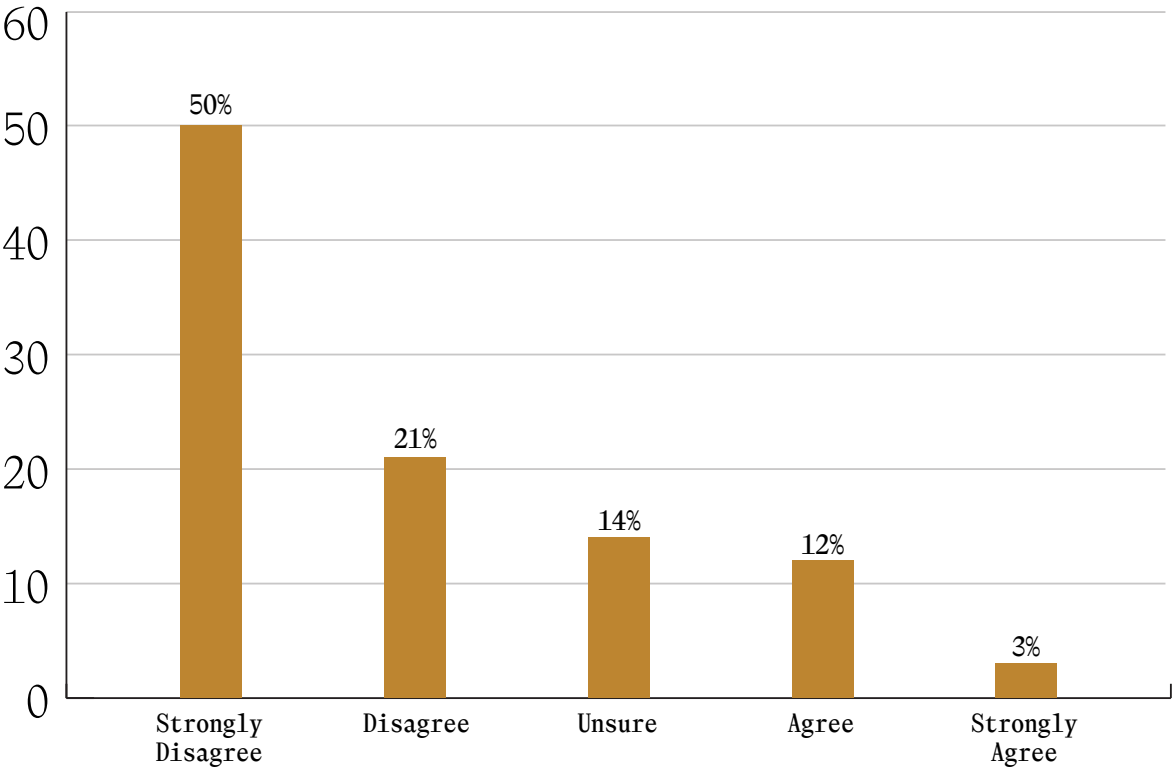
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN LAID OFF AS A MUSIC CRITIC, WHETHER DIRECTLY
OR INDIRECTLY? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



I CAN EASILY FIND PAID OPPORTUNITIES TO PRODUCE MUSIC CRITICISM



I AM ABLE TO MAKE A LIVING AS A MUSIC CRITIC



Precarity within the music criticism profession is also reflected in the conditions under which critics report they produce criticism. Not surprisingly, a large majority (70%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I am able to make a living as a music critic,” and 69% disagreed or strongly disagreed with “I can easily find paid opportunities to produce music criticism.” Part-time/freelance critics were far more likely to strongly disagree with the former statement than those indicating they have full-time roles. Less than a third (29%) of respondents reported that they work full time as a critic as either staff members or freelancers. Over half (55%) of the critics selected that they are currently working part-time as freelancers, with nearly two out of five (38%) reporting they produce unpaid criticism. Nearly one out of five (18%) noted that they currently are earning no wages at all for their criticism work. Notably, demographics do not appear to play a significant role in employment outcomes: critics of color, female or nonbinary critics, and younger critics were no more likely to be in more precarious roles (unpaid, part-time, or freelance) compared to their older, white, and male colleagues.

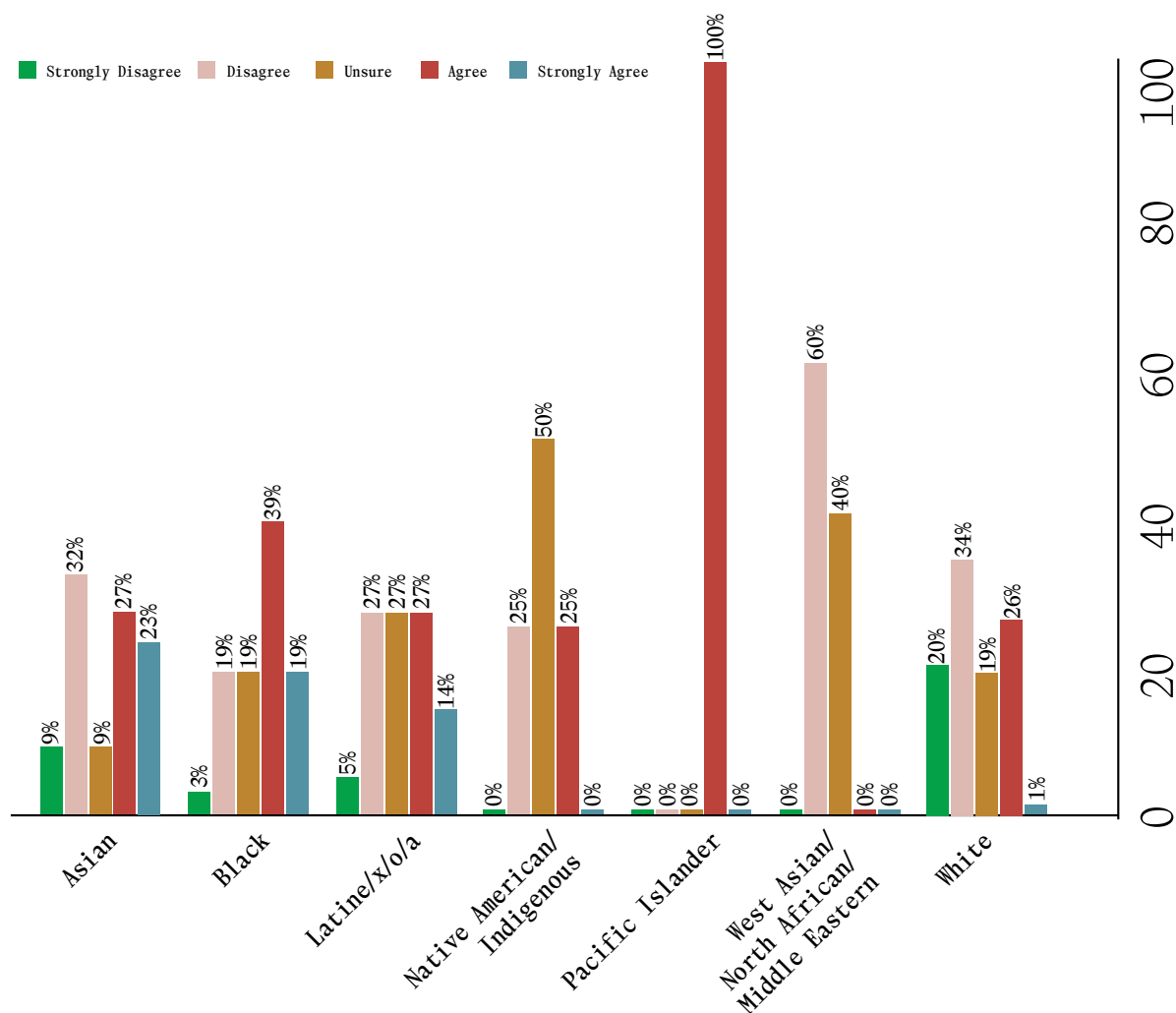
Concerningly, almost half (48%) of the critics report having been laid off at some point in their career, with the most common reason being that the outlet they worked for was shut down. Other reasons for loss of work that the critics provided

included editors whom they were working under as freelancers being laid off, outlets moving away from music criticism, or other forms of cost cutting.

Despite these unstable working conditions, there was no agreement around whether these critics should be producing work for free to advance their careers. Asked if they felt they needed to create music criticism for free to gain exposure: slightly less than half either disagreed or strongly disagreed (45%), while around a third (34%) either agreed or strongly agreed. However, these numbers change substantially when adjusted for both race and years of experience. The group most likely to agree that they need to write for free for exposure were critics of color with between one and five years of writing experience; over 76% of respondents in that category agreed with this idea. In contrast, the group *least* likely to agree with it were white critics with sixteen or more years of experience; barely 20% in that group agreed with this belief. Also, male critics were also far more likely to *disagree* with this statement versus female or nonbinary respondents, while critics of color were slightly more likely to *strongly agree* with this statement versus white critics. Overall, emergent critics, especially those from marginalized gender and racial identities, seem more compelled to work for free to advance their careers.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

I BELIEVE THAT ASPECT(S) OF MY IDENTITY (RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY) HAVE LIMITED MY OPPORTUNITIES AS A CRITIC.

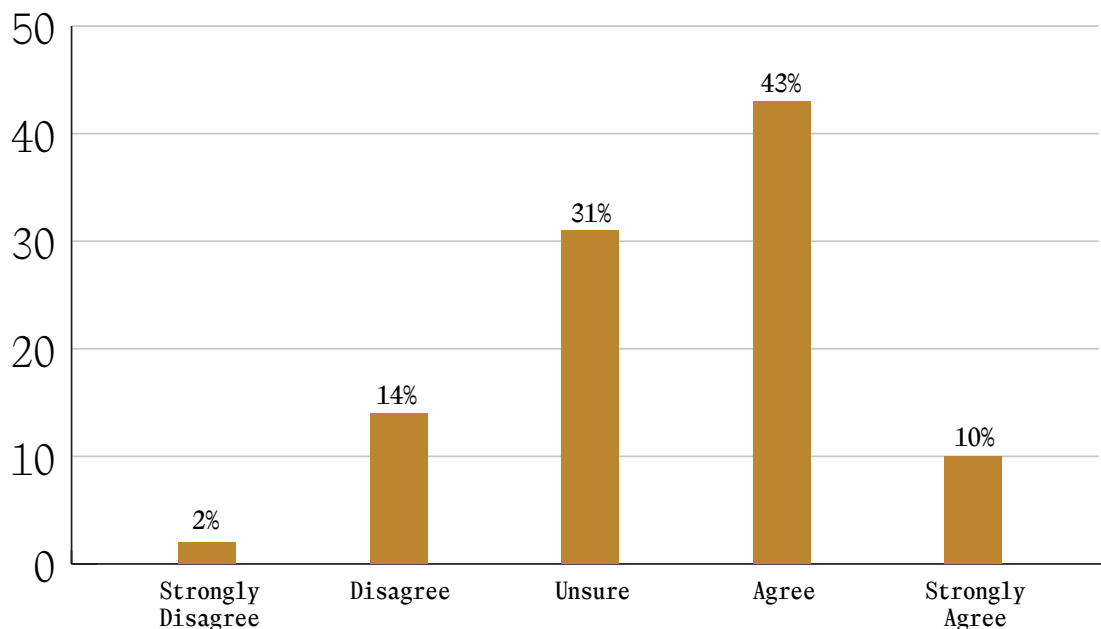


We asked respondents whether they felt aspects of their identity—including race, gender, and disability—have limited their career/professional opportunities as critics. Racial identity was one of the strongest predictors of how these critics responded to this question: a vast majority of critics of color (93%) responded that they *strongly* agree with this statement, while a large majority (87%) of white critics strongly *disagreed* with this statement. Gender identity also played a significant role: female and nonbinary

critics were much more likely (63%) to agree or strongly agree that aspects of their identity have limited their opportunities, compared to 94% of male-identified critics strongly *disagreeing* with that statement.

Accessing professional opportunities was also an issue for those who identified as members of the disability community. They were far more likely than their nondisabled colleagues to strongly agree (40%) that aspects of their identity had limited their criticism opportunities.

I FEEL OTHERS MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW I WILL EVALUATE RECORDINGS OR ARTISTS BASED ON ASPECT(S) OF MY IDENTITY (RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, ETC.)



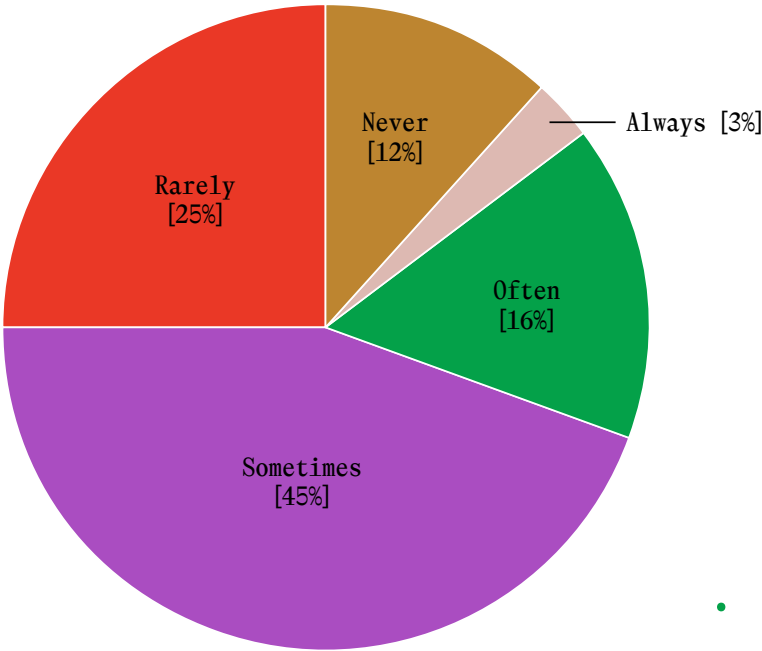
Identity issues are also tied to perceptions about how critics evaluate recordings or artists, i.e., that Latine critics are more likely to be interested in or supportive of Latine pop artists, for example. Overall, a slim majority (53%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel others make assumptions about how I will evaluate recordings or artists based on aspect(s) of my identity (race, gender, sexuality, etc.)” Gender appears to be the strongest predictor of how critics answered this question, with a significant majority (77%) of female or gender nonbinary/fluid respondents strongly agreeing with the statement. Racial identity also plays a role, with respondents of color more likely to agree or strongly agree to this statement (49%) versus white respondents (36%).

Respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *aspects of their identity have limited their opportunities* had the option to explain why they did so. A number of common themes emerged. One was the specific challenges faced by critics with intersectional marginalities. As one respondent wrote, “I’m a queer Black woman. Look around the newsrooms in this country. How many of us do you see in that space, let alone in a staff or leadership role?”

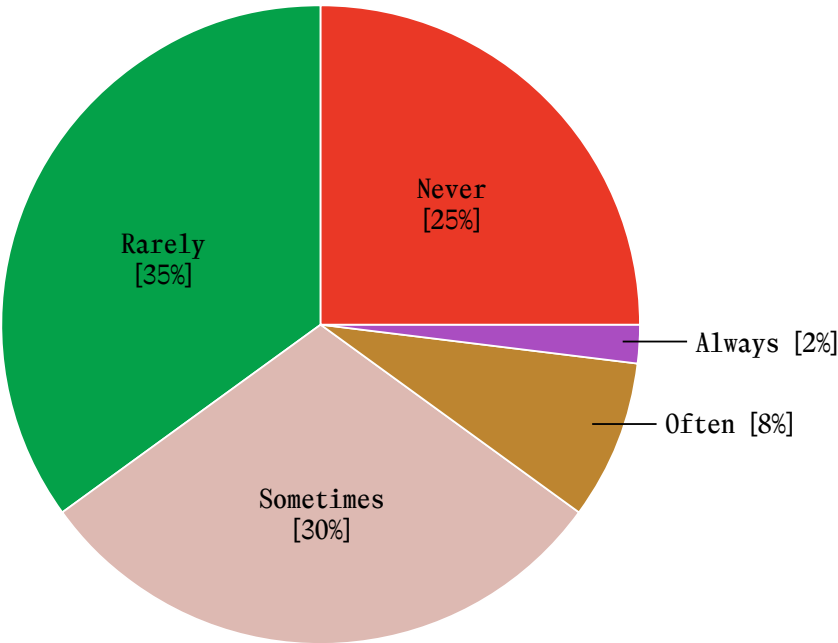
Another theme in these responses was perceived “gatekeeping” along gender lines by white and male leadership in the industry, both historically and in the present. As one critic wrote, “As a woman my work is never taken as seriously as a man’s.” Another wrote, “Being a woman... [editors] let me write about female artists, but give key male artists to male writers. That hasn’t changed, and might even be worse since the ’80s.” A Latine respondent shared, “Sexism in music criticism has always been at the forefront of my experience, and as a Latina historically I’ve had to fight to write about even EXTREMELY popular Latin artists in mainstream music publications.”

In terms of racial identity, critics of color also feel pigeonholed into specific assignments, which often means being limited to writing about only artists or genres tied to their ethnic background. As one respondent wrote, “my race, gender and age have at times led to assumptions about the kind of music I am knowledgeable about, meaning I have missed out on certain big commissions I would have loved to be considered for.” Another wrote, “I am a trans Latine critic—therefore I’m often either pigeonholed or passed over when it comes to opportunities.” In the In-Depth Interviews portion of the report, we explore these issues in far greater detail.

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU WORKED WITH EDITOR(S) OF COLOR?



HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE IN YOUR EDITORIAL PROCESS? (ARTISTS OR PUBLIC RELATIONS STAFF ASKING TO READ A DRAFT, ASKING TO HAVE SOMETHING REMOVED/CHANGED AFTER PUBLICATION, OR ANY OTHER FORM OF EDITORIAL INTERFERENCE?)



One challenge that critics in other spheres, especially theater and film, face involves the structures that determine access to things like tickets for performances or screenings that may limit their opportunities to write. This appears to be less of a concern among our music critics. A majority (55%) of critics agreed or strongly agreed that they can access the resources they need to produce criticism, including record advances, concert tickets, and artist contacts for interviews. A slightly larger majority (59%) reported that they had rarely or never experienced external interference in their editorial process, including incidents such as artists or public relations staff asking to read a draft or asking to have something removed/changed after publication.

However, gender identity served as an important predictor for how our critics responded to these questions: male critics were far more likely to report that they had never experienced editorial interference compared to their female and nonbinary colleagues. Similarly, of the critics who strongly disagree that they can easily access the resources they need to produce criticism, 73% identified as other than male. These sentiments may also be connected to a perception shared by several respondents that male critics still serve as “gatekeepers” in the music criticism industry, and thus tend to receive more prestigious appointments and assignments, which will be further discussed in the In-Depth Interviews section.

Within mainstream journalism outlets, the need for more editors of color is frequently cited as an important dimension to improving diversity within both the newsroom staff and the kinds of stories that are assigned.¹⁶ Within our sample, the amount of experience critics have had with

editors of color varies, with 18% reporting that they often or always worked with an editor of color, 45% having worked with one some of the time, and 25% having rarely worked with one. 12% of the critics reported never having worked with an editor of color.

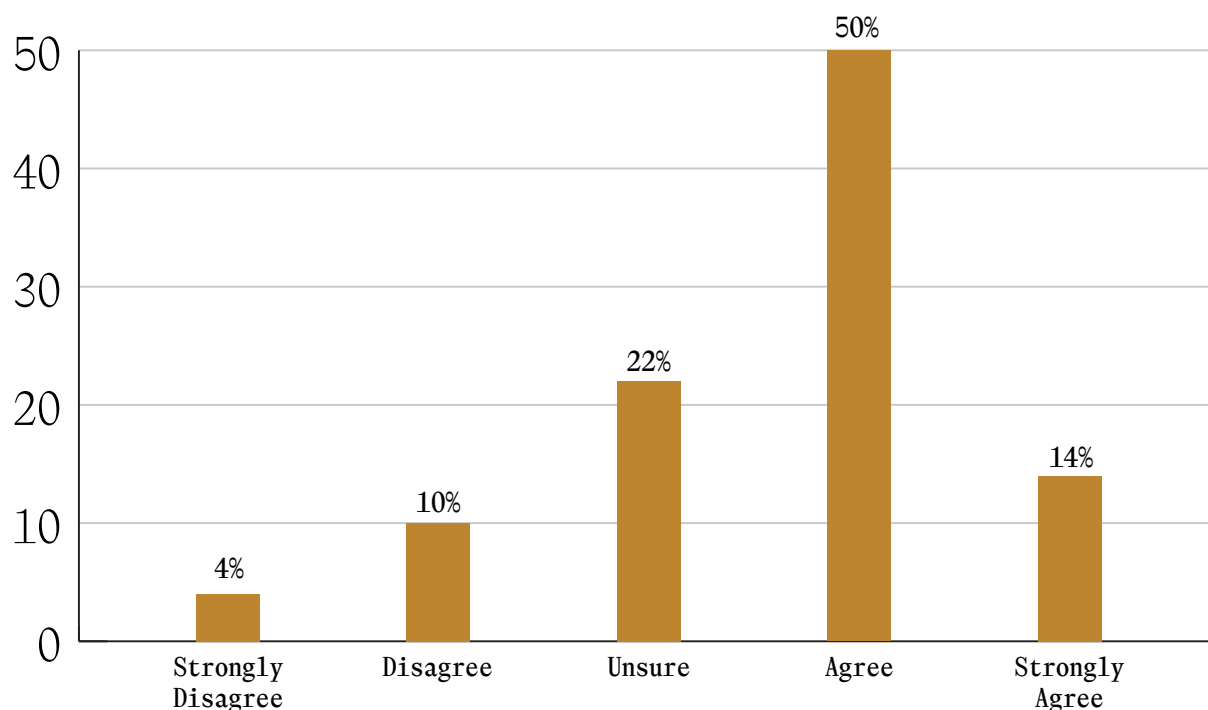
Racial identity was not a strong predictor of whether or not a critic had worked with an editor of color. However, working with an editor of color did result in more positive outcomes for critics of color in some cases. For example, self-identified critics of color were more likely to strongly agree with the statement “I am able to relate to my colleagues in music criticism,” with 16% doing so. While that isn’t a large number of respondents, by comparison, *none* of the critics of color who reported *never* having worked with an editor of color felt this way. Likewise, those who reported having worked with editors of color were also more likely to indicate that they had better opportunities to be paid for music criticism compared to critics of color who reported never having worked with an editor of color.

Overall, critics of all backgrounds reported feeling a strong sense of community with their colleagues. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I have mentors in music criticism that I can go to for advice.” Similarly, over two-thirds (68%) of critics agree or strongly agree with the statement “I am able to relate to my colleagues in music criticism.” While this was beyond the scope of our survey, future research could explore the reasons why critics do *not* feel that they have mentors or strong relationships with other critics, since roughly one-third of our pool disagreed with those statements.

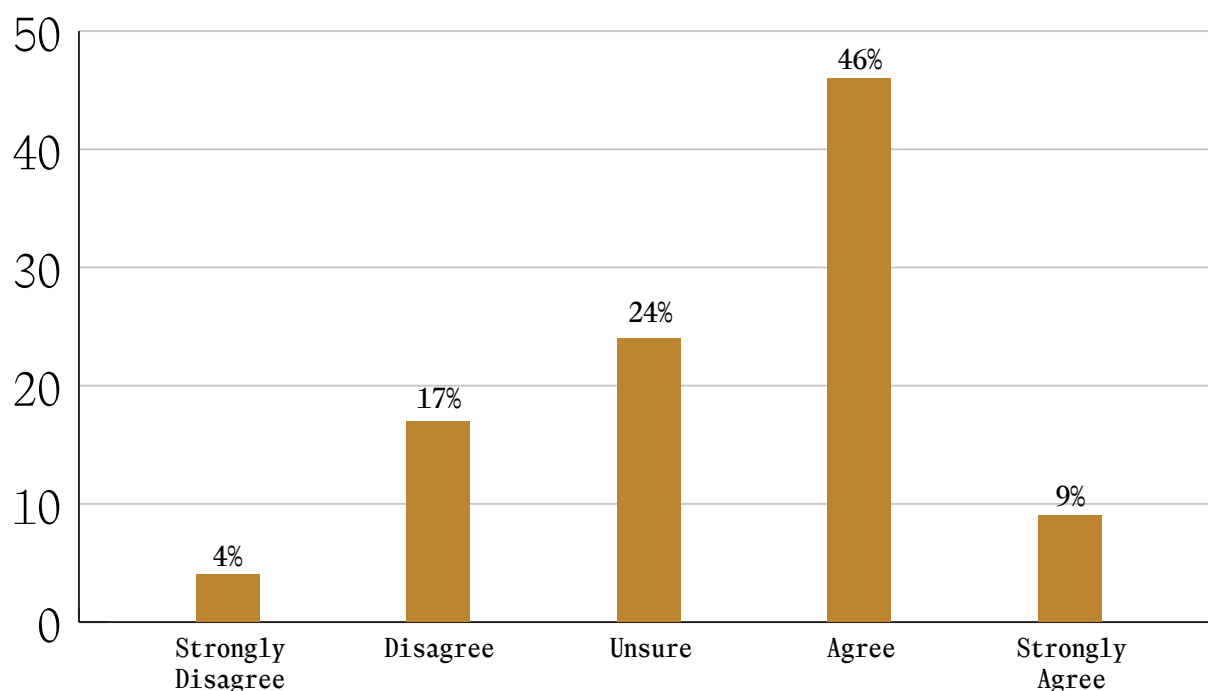
¹⁶For example, see *Breaking Through: Overcoming Structural Barriers for Journalists of Color*, Asian American Journalists Association, Rapid Research Evaluation, 2024, and Tara Pixley, “A New Focus: Why We Need More Visual Journalists and Editors of Color,” *Nieman Reports*, May 15, 2017.

TECHNOLOGICAL PRESSURES, DIGITAL VISIBILITY, AND ONLINE FAN CULTURE

DIGITAL/SOCIAL MEDIA PROVIDES ME WITH MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MY CRITICISM WORK



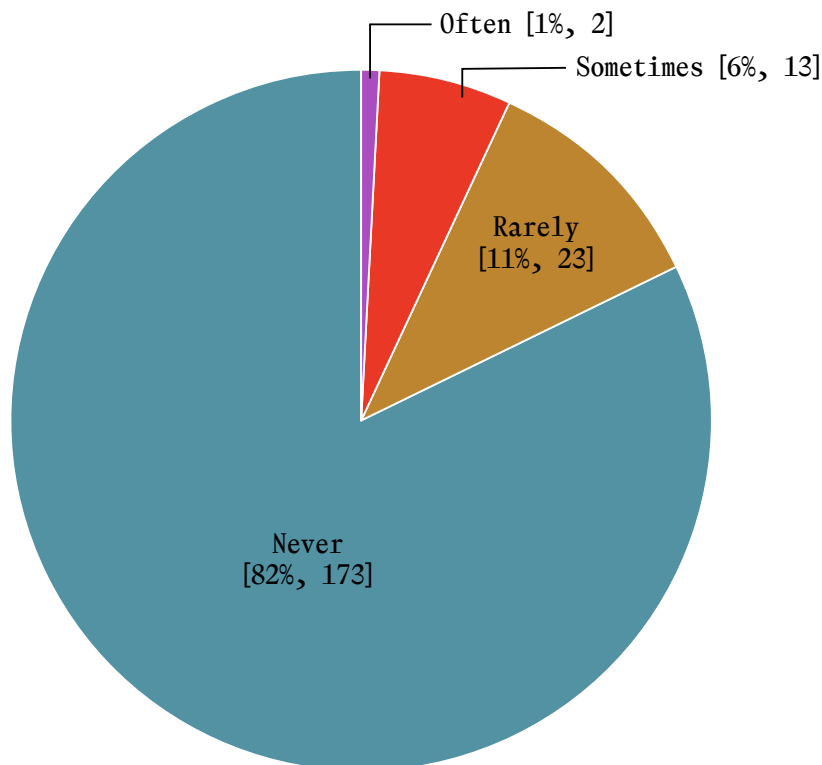
TO BE SUCCESSFUL, I NEED TO CREATE CRITICISM USING DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA (TEXT, AUDIO, VIDEO, ETC.)



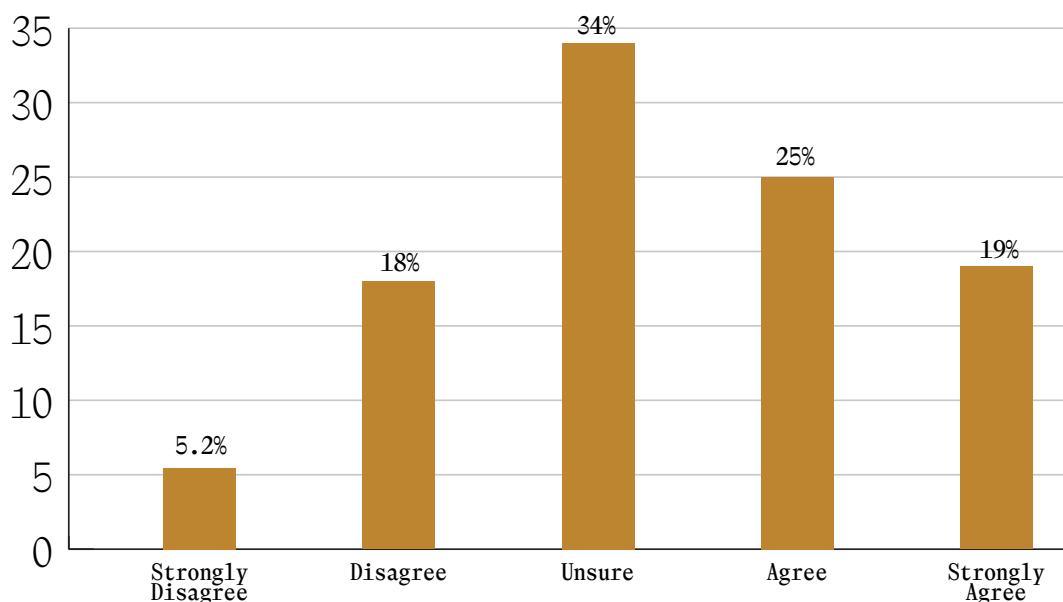
Our critics have a wide range of opinions when it comes to the impact of digital technology, particularly artificial intelligence technologies, on their work. Nearly two-thirds (64%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “digital/social media provides me with more opportunities for my music criticism.” Younger critics were much more likely to embrace digital and social media versus their older counterparts,

with three-quarters (76%) of critics forty-four or younger *strongly* agreeing with this statement. Race was also a predictor for this question: critics of color were slightly more likely to strongly agree (21%) with this question versus white critics (9%). When it came to different issues within the broader topic of digital technology in criticism, however, there was more nuance in these critics’ responses.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE AI (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE) IN YOUR MUSIC CRITICISM WORK?



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TECHNOLOGY IS NEGATIVELY IMPACTING MY MUSIC CRITICISM WORK



This nuance was most obvious when it came to the topic of *artificial intelligence* (AI). Nearly *all* of the critics (92%) reported that they have rarely or never used AI in their music criticism work, while the small number of those who reported that they did use AI noted that they only did so for minor tasks, such as generating talking points for interviews, suggesting headlines, checking spelling and grammar, and simple fact-checking.

Regardless of the degree of personal AI tool use, our group of critics held strong opinions about the consequences of artificial intelligence on their criticism. A little less than half (44%) of the critics either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Artificial intelligence technology is negatively impacting my music criticism work.” Likely owing to the still-emerging nature of AI technologies in professional settings, a third (34%) responded that they are unsure of the impact on their work. Nevertheless, a large number—a quarter of all respondents—opted to explain how they felt AI is impacting their criticism via a free-text response following this question. Several themes emerged:

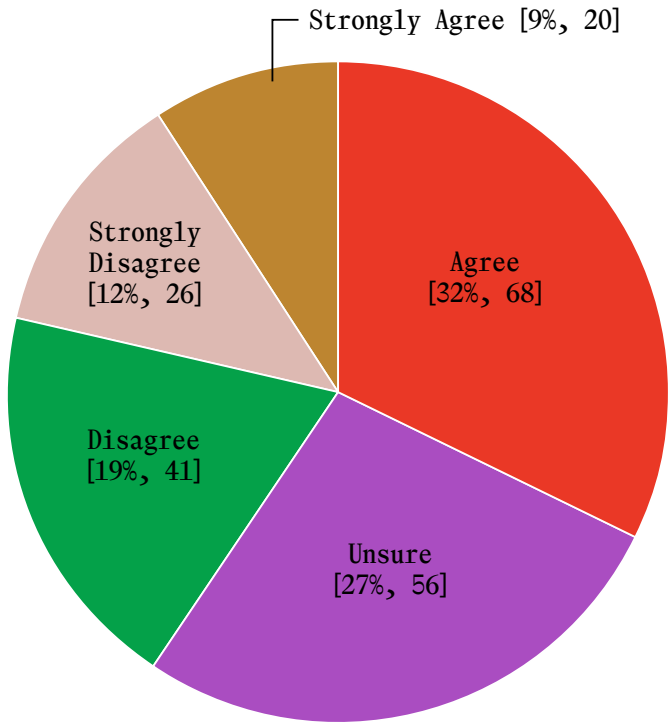
Overall, concerns around artificial intelligence in music criticism centered on the ways in which the technology could increase the instability within their already precarious criticism careers. Many felt that their current jobs were at risk, while some cited having already lost freelancing opportunities to AI. Several responses mentioned how AI scrapers were stealing the critic’s “voice”

from their published work in order to create content without their permission. As one critic wrote, “AI is built on plagiarizing my work, and the work of countless others, and tech providers are encouraging the process of replacing the work of human beings with summaries by AI.”

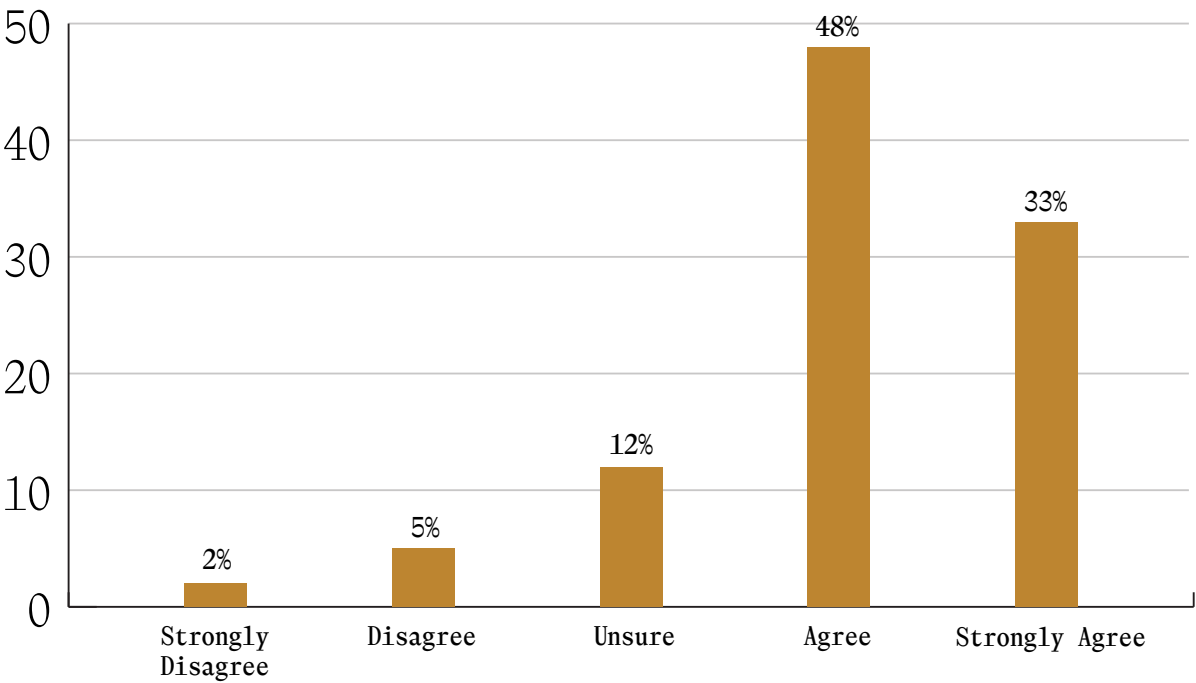
Critics also felt AI served to discredit the value of criticism by raising expectations for speed and productivity. For one respondent, those who use AI in their criticism “are discrediting the value of music criticism for everyone, setting unrealistic expectations of the time and care needed to provide genuinely insightful, passionate and human responses to art and culture.” As another respondent similarly wrote, “Writers need time for the mind to be still and decompress. AI allows writers to bypass those moments of critical self-reflection in order to meet a deadline.”

Critics also felt AI further minimized their work by redirecting traffic away from their sites and outlets, a development of particular importance, considering how highly online news outlets prioritize this kind of traffic. The one silver lining was that critics and outlets may counter these issues by finding better ways to engage with existing audiences. As one person wrote, “Because AI is decimating search traffic, we are refocusing our editorial strategy towards deepening our relationship with our direct audience. So that means, in theory, less [search engine optimization] bait, more music criticism for the heads, which could be cool?”

TO BE SUCCESSFUL, I NEED TO BE A SOCIAL MEDIA 'INFLUENCER' IN ADDITION
TO BEING A CRITIC



TO BE SUCCESSFUL, I NEED TO PROMOTE MY WORK ON SOCIAL MEDIA



There was also a diversity of opinions as to whether writers feel the need to adopt a social media “influencer” strategy to promote their work. Two out of five (42%) agreed with the statement that they need to be social media influencers, in addition to being critics, to be successful. Not surprisingly, responses differed strongly by age group: respondents forty-four or younger were far more likely to agree with this statement, with 43% doing so, compared to those forty-five and older (23%). In line with responses to the question regarding the role of digital and social media in their work, critics of color were also more likely to strongly agree (68%) with this statement versus white critics (32%).

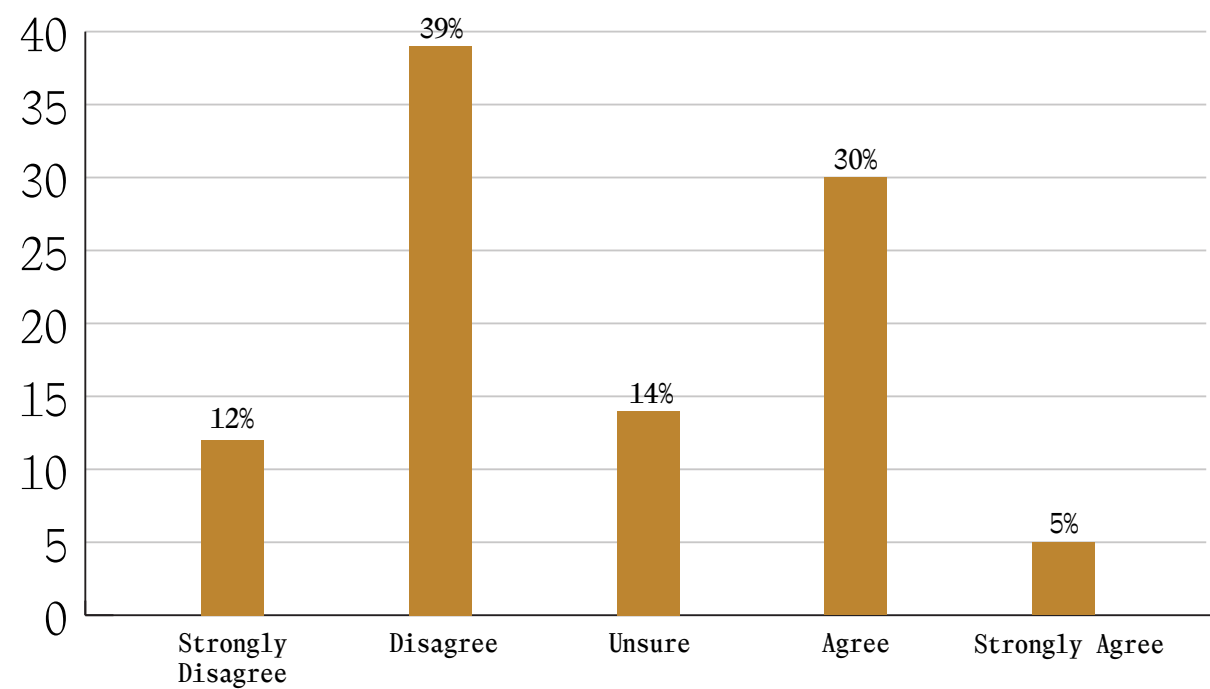
At the same time, however, a vast majority (81%) of critics agreed with the statement “To be successful, I need to promote my work on social media,” with an even higher proportion of critics forty-four or younger (87%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. And indeed, critics of color were also slightly more likely to strongly agree with this statement (53%) compared to white critics (47%). One younger critic who elaborated on this theme in a free response to the

question “Anything else you’d like us to know?” discussed the potential for their social media content to reach a broader audience:

I wanted to specify that one of the reasons that I do free music criticism on Instagram through reels and such, is that I feel that the people I want to reach don’t read the legacy media I’m published in. There’s a discomfort in writing and researching a topic to feed a dying publication—it feels like screaming in an empty forest. So it is a tool to get more exposure, gig opportunities etc... but also, it’s a bit of an ego thing, and a way for my work to be seen and enjoyed by more people.

Overall, while being an “influencer” appears to connote a specific type of promotion that the majority of these critics do not feel they need to practice in order to succeed, creating content for social media and participating in the “influencer economy” are clearly of importance for younger critics and critics of color in particular.

**FAN COMMUNITIES AND FAN INTERACTIONS IMPACT HOW I DISCUSS
CERTAIN ARTISTS/TOPICS IN MY CRITICISM**



In the digital age, music critics are liable to receive instant feedback from readers in the form of comments and direct messages, particularly from those who feel strongly about the musical acts they cover. Nevertheless, this does not shape how a slim majority of our critics do their work: 51% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “Fan communities and fan interactions impact how I discuss certain artists/topics in my criticism.” Perhaps not surprisingly, given the growing importance of “stan culture” in our current era, age was

a strong predictor of this—respondents forty-five or older were far more likely to strongly disagree with this statement versus critics forty-four or younger (while critics who reported that they covered K-pop were much more likely to strongly agree). This topic has become of increasing concern for different kinds of writers, and while our survey did not extensively get into people’s experiences with so-called “stan culture” (i.e., weaponized fan culture), this was a topic more deeply explored in our in-depth interviews.



3 THE FUTURE OF POP MUSIC CRITICISM

This section draws on the free responses that critics wrote in the survey, reflecting on their perceptions of the future of music criticism. Their comments speak to both deep concern about the field's sustainability as well as the optimism they have for the next generation of writers.

Several critics reflected on the shrinking professional pathways into criticism and the disappearance of institutions that once trained and supported new writers. One respondent lamented the loss of newsroom environments where early-career writers learned by observing colleagues and receiving structured editorial guidance:

The context for that learning is now completely gone, even the physical newsroom space where I picked up so much just chatting to people face to face and watching how they worked.

Other writers emphasized the instability of their careers and the challenges of navigating a profession that feels significantly different from the one they started with:

I long ago abandoned [music criticism] as a career... it's completely unsustainable for all but a few extremely established people.

Another worried about the normalization of unpaid labor and what it means for the future:

Beginning writers are usually not in a position to refuse to work for "exposure," and I really fear the effects of that expectation.

Despite these concerns, some respondents expressed optimism about the new critics entering the profession today, noting the "hunger," "passion," and perspectives younger critics bring to the field despite facing harsher economic and structural conditions. One wrote:

Although it feels like a desperate time for young music critics, it's also an era of extremely talented new writers... providing POV that is sorely missing.

Some critics also questioned whether "criticism" remains the right word for what they do—or

whether the field is evolving into something broader than evaluation. While we explored this in more detail in the interviews, one survey respondent explained:

Not all writing about music is music criticism... I find the term kind of off-putting... I'm more interested in making something—a story, an argument, a portrait—that other people can respond to.

This reframing speaks to frustrations around reader engagement in a digital age where the value of music writing feels diminished.

At the same time, others stressed the need for community building and intergenerational support. As one critic put it:

I think we all have a responsibility to put ourselves out there as a way of encouraging and inspiring younger writers who may not feel like there's a place for them in this field.

Another was direct about the current lack of community:

I have not found much of a community amongst critics and music writers... I would love to see more community, connection, and mentorship.

The testimonies that our respondents shared portray music criticism as a field that has lost many of the structures that once sustained it, with critics mourning the disappearance of newsrooms and editorial mentorship, only to be confronted instead by frequent instability and unpaid labor. Yet they also find encouragement in the passion and perspective of younger writers who continue to push the field forward despite the aforementioned barriers. As our in-depth interviews will also delve into, these qualitative reflections from our survey takers suggest that pop music criticism is both confronted by an uncertain, under-resourced future yet filled with aspiring writers who still want a stake in that future. Taken together, these testimonies point to the need for renewed investment in the basic supports of the field—including increasing paid opportunities, stronger training and mentorship programs, and more robust community networks—so that critics of all backgrounds have better opportunities to build lasting, equitable careers.

SURVEY TAKEAWAYS

- ① Critics are still largely white and male. Our sample remained dominated by white, male critics, although there is evidence that younger creators are more diverse across gender, sexuality, and ethnic backgrounds. However, if this trend is to continue, it requires support in the form of intentional interventions.
- ② Institutional support is uneven and informal. Our respondents indicate that their pathways into the criticism field have depended on informal mentorship, individual initiative, and disparate training opportunities rather than coordinated, sustainable infrastructures.
- ③ Most critics are freelancers. The labor landscape is overwhelmingly made up of freelancers juggling multiple roles, platforms, and formats without the stability of long-term staff positions. Most respondents report navigating a freelance ecosystem in which paid positions—let alone full-time roles—are incredibly rare.
- ④ Financial instability affects everyone, but discrimination persists. Economic precarity has become the contemporary reality for all pop music critics, but respondents of color, women, nonbinary critics, and disabled critics report greater barriers to access, more frequent experiences with bias, and heightened pressures to work for free.
- ⑤ Editors of color make a difference but are rare. Even as the data suggest that mentorship and editorial relationships improve professional outcomes for critics of color, their experiences working with editors of color are limited, constraining equitable opportunities and support.
- ⑥ Rapid technological change creates new pressures. Critics increasingly contend with the demands of online self-promotion, AI-related displacement, and attacks from social media-fueled fandoms. Younger critics and critics of color are especially challenged, facing heightened expectations for digital visibility and engagement alongside greater financial precarity.

PART TWO: IN DEPTH INTERVIEWS

OUR SURVEY RESULTS indicate that critics of color are still underrepresented within the ranks of music critics and experience greater challenges than their white peers. As with *Topdogs and Underdogs*, we felt it was crucial to center their voices and invited over two dozen writers of color for in-depth interviews. We gained deeper, more nuanced insights into everything from their daily working conditions to their broader impressions around the state of criticism and where they feel change is most urgently needed. While many of their perspectives apply to critics in general, where appropriate, we highlight the roles that race/ethnicity play in their professional lives.

The Methodologies section explains our process for choosing interviewees in more detail, but as a reminder, our research team sat down with twenty-nine critics of color whose responses have been anonymized to protect their identities. While our sample was too small to be truly representative at the national level, the research team took pains to select critics of different ethnic backgrounds, years of experience, professional roles, and geographic locations. Our ranks included veteran writers for magazines and newspapers alongside emergent social media content creators, all of them passionate about an array of musical genres. Our analysis identified three major themes running through their interviews, which we've broken into the following sections:

1.

Economic Precarity focuses on the growing instability that defines music criticism as a form of work. While interviewees discuss their individual experiences, this section frames the issue as primarily *structural*, shaping who can literally afford to create criticism and under what circumstances. The section highlights how declining pay, collapsing institutions, and uneven platform economies have transformed criticism into a practice increasingly sustained by personal commitment rather than material support.

2.

Gatekeeping Forces analyzes the shifting systems of power that shape critics' opportunities, visibility, and autonomy. While traditional editorial dynamics remain influential, this section also emphasizes how social media platforms, artists, publicists, and fan communities pose similar challenges to manage. These collective forces shape a landscape in which critics—especially critics of color—must navigate overlapping pressures that affect not only what gets produced, but how freely and safely criticism can be practiced.

3.

Professional Pathways and Purposes examines how critics of color understand their work and identities within a rapidly changing field, foregrounding the diversity of routes into criticism and how critics make sense of its value. The section explores how mentorship, self-publishing, and personal conviction shape critics' sense of purpose, even as structural uncertainty complicates their ability to imagine criticism as a stable or singular profession. It ends with a series of observations and predictions about the future of music criticism.

All quoted passages come from our anonymized interviewees unless indicated otherwise. We describe interviewees as “critics” and “writers” interchangeably as most of them combine criticism with other forms of writing.

NUMBER OF
CRITICS
INTERVIEWED:
TWENTY NINE

NUMBER OF
STATES WHERE
INTERVIEWEES
LIVE:

(CA, FL, IL, NJ
NY, PA, TX)

SEVEN

NUMBER
OF COUNTRIES
WHERE
INTERVIEWEES
LIVE: IN NORTH AMERICA, THE CARIBBEAN, AND AFRICA **THREE**

(OTHER THAN
THE US)

RACE/ETHNICITY
OF INTERVIEWEES

ASIAN ⁵ BLACK ¹⁴
LATINE ¹⁰ NATIVE ¹

[NOTE: ONE INTERVIEWEE IDENTIFIES WITH TWO CATEGORIES.]

PRONOUNS USED
BY INTERVIEWEES:
HE HIM¹¹ SHE HER¹⁶
THEY THEM²

EARLY CAREER: 5 YEARS OR LESS:
TEN

MID-CAREER: 5-15 YEARS:
TWELVE

ESTABLISHED: 15+ YEARS:
SEVEN

INTERVIEWEES PRODUCE CONTENT IN THE FOLLOWING FORMATS:

AUDIO⁹ TEXT²⁴
VIDEO⁵

NOTE: MANY INTERVIEWEES ARE ACTIVE IN MORE THAN ONE FORMAT.

1 ECONOMIC PRECARITY



FOR MOST WORKING WRITERS, the financial realities of the profession weigh heavily on their ability to pursue the craft at all. As discussed in the introduction, rates for conventional criticism—song/album reviews or long-form essays—combined with the collapse of music media outlets offering salaried positions has led most of our interviewees to abandon any ambition of pursuing a sustainable living through writing criticism. Instead, nearly every person we spoke to described their criticism careers as a patchwork of freelance assignments, self-published work, and other “labor of love/passion projects,” that, in many cases, have to be coordinated around other responsibilities

including non-criticism-related jobs/careers, family obligations, and other commitments that prevent people from devoting as much time or focus to their music writing as they would prefer.

We explore the theme of economic precarity on two levels: “Financial Realities” concerns the immediate pressures that our interviewees contend with in their daily lives while “Industry Instability” turns toward larger systemic issues within the music media industry that impact critics. Overall, our interviewees describe a starkly constrained economic backdrop that not only influences how they write criticism but also what forms of criticism are promoted or stymied within that environment.

1.1 FINANCIAL REALITIES

After struggling through a string of layoffs and similar experiences, one early-career critic concluded there is little hope of landing an “ideal critic job” as a salaried staff writer:

You could either have one of five [full-time] jobs that exist, or you are doing something that you either don't want to do, or you're hustling to make it work, or you're working something else at the same time, right? Working an editorial assistant job, or editing copy, or... doing news articles that are not criticism.

This interviewee was not just describing their current reality—a podcast freelancer who slots in criticism on the side—but that of most of our interviewees as well; one works as an editorial assistant at a national magazine; another works in communications for a national outlet, while others work as editors. Even among our interviewees who enjoy the financial security of a salaried position, only a few of these roles involve writing, let alone criticism. Some work in fields like education or the sciences, others had long-time jobs in the nonprofit, public, and corporate sectors. As they told us, “I guess I would say [being a writer is] my career, but it's not what pays my bills.”

That refrain resonates with most of our interviewees. The vast majority may identify as critics or writers but it's what they pursue “on the side” rather than “what pays their bills.” That juggling act often comes at the cost of people's time, energy, and opportunity. One of our mid-career critics is currently salaried in a non-criticism job and all their writing has to be done on nights and weekends. They realize this pace isn't healthy, admitting, “taking a break has definitely been something that I've needed to do. But it actually kind of kills me inside that I can't jump on certain [writing] projects because I have to pay my bills and focus on [my day job].” A different mid-career respondent—salaried at a media company—also takes on a second shift to produce music-related podcasts they're passionate about. They described

their situation succinctly: “As a critic, it is definitely a part time job that I do full time.”

While writing as a “side gig” feels unavoidable for most of our interviewees, for some, that has been their goal for both philosophical and pragmatic reasons. One early-career critic—salaried in an editorial role—explains how they, “love being [a critic] that doesn't have to worry about making money off it.” They feel their day job allows them to “just be a critic—unfiltered—and actually express a well thought-out opinion that's not hindered by what... money I can make or not make off of it.” A mid-career critic—salaried at an educational institution—went a step further, insisting that, “criticism entails an honest consideration of any piece of artwork that is not compromised in any way,” and they accept that their writing may be, “a money-losing venture, and I'd actually prefer it that way because I think money is poison [when]... writers write about the things that they're forced to, as a result of needing to make it a stable source of income.” An early-career critic—salaried at a media company in an unrelated role—shared that in an ideal world they would love to be a “career critic,” but “the institutional barriers and the powers that be make that not so. So in that vein, I would never want criticism to be my career.”

Most of these voices are from people who primarily produce text-based criticism; the conditions for multimedia critics are different though no less fraught. The biggest contrast is that multimedia content creators generally are not paid a set rate per word/piece. Instead, their compensation is subject to even less predictable forces, including engagement/listener metrics, byzantine platform monetization rules, and an inherently unstable flow of advertising, sponsorships, or subscriber support. Even something as seemingly straightforward as translating views/listens into a standardized pay rate can be inconsistent to the point of feeling arbitrary.

For example, one of our early-career critics primarily creates YouTube video content around K-pop and shared that their highest performing video so far garnered over 450,000 views,

“I guess I would say being a writer is my career, but it's not what pays my bills.”

resulting in a payout of over \$2,000, which is a little less than half a cent per view. But the same creator had a different video that only netted 5,000 views and, for that, they received \$8, a rate that is only one-third of the rate the higher-viewed video received. Moreover, a different multimedia critic who produces videos on Black popular culture shared that their videos usually average around 100,000 views each and, for that, they earn between 2.5 to 3.0 cents per view, a rate 500–600% greater than what the first creator earned for their most popular video.

This massive disparity in compensation rate reflects how YouTube and other platforms pay rates largely dependent on embedded advertising, but different advertisers pay different rates for different content niches. As popular as K-pop may be, it would appear that, in the case of the first creator, their videos draw less interest from advertisers compared to the second creator, thus explaining how the latter might receive such a markedly higher payout. However, none of our critics said that they make changes to their content in order to increase returns.

As text-based publications also experiment with multimedia content, especially podcasts and online videos, a separate set of issues arises around equity and compensation for staff writers expected to assist with this content. A senior critic, who was salaried at a major newspaper at the time, recalled when a company approached their publication about creating sponsored content in the form of short video interviews. However, while the publication received compensation for this effort, that money didn't trickle down to the actual staffers who were asked to create the videos: "They wanted us to start interviewing artists on [a streaming service]. It was a sponsored thing... and guess what, we don't get paid for any of that. They pay the publication. They pay the CEO. It happens through the marketing and the sales team, and then they're like, 'We'll bring in our writers, but... they already make a salary so we don't have to pay them any extra.'"

These kinds of frustrations have led many of our interviewees to pursue editorial freedom via their own newsletters, podcasts, and other forms of self-published content. One of our more experienced, mid-career respondents has worked in a variety of different music writing-related positions and is currently a full-time freelancer. They observed that:

The media landscape is incredibly bleak, especially right now, for so many reasons. And I think often you see that when people get laid off, or they have reached a point where they can no longer progress at a certain newsroom, they take off and they start a newsletter. And a lot of times, people are doing this at their own expense. They're paying editors and copy editors and fact checkers out of their own pocket. They don't have health insurance, they don't have a union. You are doing the best given the constraints.

While this same interviewee acknowledged that "some people love it and they never want to go back to writing at a newsroom, because they found a lot of freedom and range," they believe that too many critics are given a binary choice between getting paid for work they are ambivalent about while their passion projects around criticism are largely uncompensated: "I don't think that's necessarily good for the landscape, that it's very splintered in this way."

Critics who are dependent on writing as their primary source of income have long been accustomed to taking on assignments in which they have little interest simply to make ends meet. However, the development of online tools and platforms for self-publishing has increased the amount of uncompensated "labor of love" writing/content that our interviewees produce. These decisions come with both opportunity cost and literal cost as the price of editorial freedom often comes down to not being paid, regardless of how much time or effort one spends.

As one senior critic—also a full-time freelancer—quipped, "I used to jokingly say that I've written multiple books on Facebook and Twitter," but added, "I write for free with a purpose." On their Substack newsletter, they sometimes post "pieces that got killed," as well as original content, some of which has drawn the attention of editors who then commission a paid piece on the same topic. Other interviewees also self-publish constantly through newsletters, though one mid-career critic—salaried at a media company—specified: "I don't want to write anywhere for free if it's not my Substack. If I'm going to publish something, I'm getting paid for it."

The mid-career critic who previously described money as "poison" self-publishes a

newsletter as well and added that getting paid is inherently compromising, “I don’t think you should have a desire to make a living from it. That’s part of the problem. A lot of the writers that I like... are also in a similar position as me where they have a day job and then they’re [self-publishing criticism]... and they don’t feel compromised... and they’re covering way more obscure music than any publications ever do.”

While it’s likely many of their peers would disagree with the idea that it’s a “problem” to want to make a living writing criticism, this comment highlights how compromised some critics feel when it comes to balancing editorial freedom with the demands that outlets or editors place on them. However, the desire for that freedom, informed by people’s passion for the music they want to write about, can lead publications to lowball writers who do want to make part of their living from criticism. As another mid-career critic shared:

This whole profession is based on... our passion and our love and our curiosity for these things that we want to write about. And that is often taken advantage of... like, “You can do it for peanuts, or we can find someone who’s gonna do it for free.” That’s a barrier I’ve run into many times, earlier in my career. And I think they do that on purpose to see how long you can survive off the pickle juice. It shouldn’t be a rite of passage to be disrespected for the work that you’re putting in.

Overall, these testimonials highlight how contemporary music critics patch together careers through a mix of day jobs, side hustles, and passion projects. Even for those who have managed to make the balance work, it’s an inherently unstable foundation for criticism, especially given larger structural changes in the publishing and media landscape.

TAKEAWAYS

- ①. Criticism is no longer viable as a full-time profession. Full-time, staff positions are nearly nonexistent and a career in criticism now consists of a patchwork of freelance assignments, self-publishing, and non-criticism related work. Criticism is not as well paid as reporting, publicity, or other forms of content creation.
- ②. Criticism is increasingly a "labor of love" pursued via self-publishing. Part-time critics have long worked extra hours, sometimes to the detriment of their well-being, in order to pursue projects they are passionate about. Due to increased demands and falling compensation at legacy publications, more critics are turning to newsletters, podcasts, and other forms of self-publishing. These avenues provide more editorial freedom but may not result in better economic outcomes. They also contribute to the further atomization of the media landscape as individual critics become their own brands.
- ③. Compensation models are opaque. Pay rates for written content are stagnant and suffer from a lack of consistency and transparency. However, as criticism moves increasingly into audio and video formats, critics now contend with algorithmically driven compensation models that can be even more invisible, inconsistent, and liable to change quickly without notice or explanation.
- ④. New media pressures. As traditional publications create more video content, critics experience increased pressure to be on camera or to be the "face" of a publication, although they seldom receive additional compensation for these efforts.

1.2 INDUSTRY INSTABILITY



As has been documented ad nauseum over the past twenty years, the severe contractions and consolidations within the music media industry have led to the steady disappearance of both staff and freelance opportunities for critics. In more recent times, the current administration's eagerness to defund the arts and humanities and attack public media have only made an already fragile ecosystem less stable. These issues weigh heavily on the minds of our more experienced interviewees who have seen the music criticism ecosystem collapse over time, prompting reflections on how the current situation would have changed their own career trajectories if they were starting out today. One senior critic who began writing in the late 2000s shared this observation:

I'm concerned for young people, because back in the day, when we had alternative weeklies ... we were able to find somewhere to get our start.... Where do you get your feet wet [now]? Where do you find a place where you can stay for 10, 20 years? I had a legacy paper ... where some people [had written there for] 10, 20, 30 years. So I'm concerned about young writers not finding that long term space to have a relationship with their readers.

Another mid-career writer put things even more bluntly: "I think the feasibility of being a critic, and specifically a critic of color, in 2025 is very different than it was in 2015, 2014. The machinery of music journalism, the business model, has completely collapsed." As a result, in reflecting on their own professional journey, this writer believes, "if I was trying to do criticism as a career now, I would have to keep all of that in

mind and know that I was going up against many, many things that would be an obstacle."

This goes beyond just issues of pay or the loss of staff positions, though both are part of this set of changes. Even for freelance writers who never experienced being laid off, when editors are laid off, it means they have to rebuild those relationships anew. What's more, the new editors have little security that their positions will still exist in a matter of months, let alone years. One early-career writer recalled an exchange they had with the music editor at a major newspaper where both once worked: "[This editor said], 'I wake up every day not knowing if I'll have a job,'... then at some point, he woke up and he didn't have a job. It literally is exactly how it went."

Not only has the perceived quantity of writing opportunities declined, critics must also contend with the changing styles of content that outlets now prefer, an issue explored in greater detail in Part 2.2, on the pressures created by new media platforms. As publications try to integrate social media-style content, critics have to contend with both human editors' biases and algorithmic metrics that influence the kind of content those editors seek. A mid-career critic who has worked on staff at a variety of legacy publications observed: "It's a volume game right now, because the algorithm rewards the number of times you post versus the quality of what you post. I've heard this repeated ad nauseum ... and I don't think I'm cut out for that. I don't want to spend my time trying to be funny on the internet."

For critics only creating content in multimedia spaces, instability isn't so much about institutional collapse—though the popularity of specific platforms can and will change over time—as it is about the constant uncertainty and volatility of an industry based around mercurial ad rates,

monetization policies, and sponsor/subscriber support. For example, an early-career critic who produces a successful independent web series on Black culture recently ran into an issue with one of their videos: “I spent seven days editing. The video was over an hour long. And after I hit publish, and it had been up for about 12 hours at this point, I got a notification that it has been demonetized. They found a [copyrighted] clip in there.” Unlike the tradition of “kill fees” in the print world—which not all publications offer—when multimedia platforms demonetize content, the creator receives nothing at all.

Moreover, because of how people consume video content, the creator can’t simply re-edit the video to remove the offending clip. Not only did this critic feel the clip was “very essential to the storytelling,” but more importantly, because videos generally garner the most views when first posted, taking one down, re-editing it, and uploading it again would likely result in lower viewership. The end result is still a reduced pay out. To add insult to injury, while YouTube allows creators to appeal copyright violation decisions by invoking fair use, the critic explained: “If they deny the claim ... that counts as a strike to my channel which is so unfair.” If an account accumulates enough “strikes,” YouTube can demonetize the entire channel and/or remove it completely. This would be equivalent to a best-selling author losing all royalty rights to their entire catalog and/or seeing that catalog instantly vanish from the world. For this critic, the risk was too great to consider so instead, they accepted, “I am not going to get a check for that video,” regardless of how much time they put into it or how many views it received. Testimonials like these are an important reminder that while self-publishing via multimedia platforms may promise greater creative autonomy and earnings, it is still an industry wracked by its own, distinctive forms of instability.

Regardless of medium, as our interviewees highlight, the precarious and unpredictable landscape of contemporary music criticism creates demands on writers to constantly adapt to changing conditions. This is especially true for

freelancers stringing together as many opportunities as time allows in order to grind out a living or raise the prominence of their byline. However, even those critics who’ve managed to piece together a career still have other headaches, especially in managing different invoicing practices and inconsistent pay schedules from different clients. A senior writer—currently in a salaried newspaper position—recalled the challenges they faced when they were freelancing full time: “I had to be a debt collector on top of a freelancer. It did feel like I was working overtime a lot.” These demands on the time and energy of critics led one mid-career critic to joke, “I could sustain being a critic full time if I never slept or had any friends, or did anything else.”

On the other hand, a senior critic with over twenty-five years of experience, mostly in salaried newsroom positions, says they prefer the uncertainty of freelance work over the toxic magazine environments where they worked for years: “Being in hustle culture gig work [in my late 40s] ... was not my ideal ... but it’s better than working for a company or a publication where I am being salaried and have health insurance but am being undermined or treated poorly every day, which has largely been my experience almost everywhere.”

This last point highlights how our critics have had to negotiate both large structural changes and complicated interpersonal dynamics within the criticism economy. As publications and platforms contract, reorganize, or disappear altogether, most of our interviewees have had to constantly seek and rebuild relationships with editors and other gatekeepers in pursuit of writing opportunities. These dynamics have always been complicated, but especially in this current era of precarity, the day-to-day labor of pitching, getting assignments, and navigating access is more challenging than ever, especially for writers of color. As our next section explores, our interviewees navigate a complex, racialized ecosystem—including editors but also publicists, artists, fans, and others—in which various forms of bias are a constant threat to the integrity of what critics write about and how.

TAKEAWAYS

- ①. Career pathways have disappeared. The ongoing decimation of the publishing industry, compounded by the current administration's defunding of public media, has destroyed traditional pathways into the profession and removed many of the supports that made it sustainable for previous generations.
- ②. Loss of editorial relationships. The precarity of the media environment affects editors as well. When they are laid off, critics often lose relationships they've spent years building and often have to start over from scratch with a new editor or outlet.
- ③. Algorithmic uncertainty. For critics working in social media and video, the algorithms that determine visibility and monetization are volatile and unpredictable. Machine-made decisions about who or what is supported and promoted are often absolute and difficult to appeal.

2 GATEKEEPING FORCES



Steven Ferdman/Getty Images Entertainment

IN THE “VITALITY OF BLACK CRITICISM” roundtable published by the *New York Times** in 2021, long-time critic and editor Danyl Smith expressed the concern that “music that has been created over the last fifteen to twenty years ... has not been listened to like it’s real music,” citing Cardi B and Drake as artists whose recordings are not “talked about with a lot of seriousness.” Smith attributed this partly to “there being a generation of Black writers who have not really ever worked with Black editors.”

Smith’s concerns are an important reminder that editors not only influence the commissioning and content of individual pieces of criticism but also shape the critical landscape itself. If editors aren’t taking the music of Cardi B, Drake, or other artists of color seriously, it’s far less likely that writers working under them will either, especially when editors soften the tone or direct the focus of pieces. As Smith notes, these issues are exacerbated by the continued paucity of editors of color in pop music media; this lack of diversity contributes to a lack of cultural competence

regarding musical figures, genres, and trends from marginalized communities. As our interviewees attest, they are keen to write about these artists and topics, but they need editors willing to approve and support those assignments.

These realities puncture the romantic myth of writers as solitary auteurs, hovering over their keyboards, awaiting inspiration’s touch. Criticism is deeply bound up with interpersonal relationships as well as media industry practices and policies, all of which form a hierarchical ecosystem in which what gets produced and who gets to author it can be at the mercy of editors, publishers, sponsors, readers, etc., with all their potential implicit or explicit biases. This section explores the realities of those editor relationships, the gatekeeping practices that affect a critic’s intellectual and creative freedom, and the ways that identity—racial, gender, and otherwise—impact critics’ opportunities, treatment, and legitimacy. Together, these forces don’t just shape what or how criticism is written but our collective culture for criticism.

2.1 EDITORIAL DYNAMICS

As recently as the mid-2000s, a fruitful critic/editor relationship could span years, even decades. However, as modern music media began to collapse beneath the large-scale economic and technological changes of the past twenty years, turnover for both positions became startlingly high. When outlets slash staff, it's often the arts and culture writers and editors who are treated as expendable. Whether those publications replace senior editors with less experienced (read: less expensive) editors or simply don't bother to replace them at all, writers must rebuild new relationships with editors who are often less knowledgeable, more overworked, and have their own networks and biases. These are not minor inconveniences; unless self-publishing, critics are dependent on editorial relationships and structures in order for their voices to be heard. When the ranks of editors diminish, so do opportunities for writers.

In this section, we examine the core concerns our interviewees raised about their encounters with both editorial staff and outlet priorities that shape their writing opportunities. At the most interpersonal level, these challenges manifest in editorial gatekeeping—controlling who gets to write about what—and pigeonholing—restricting critics to specific subjects. Our interviewees also pointed to broader practices that impact the kinds of music criticism and writing that get approved or declined. Taken as a whole, this section explores how our interviewees experience this complex editorial ecosystem, both in their day-to-day assignments and across the arc of their careers.

As music editor positions have become endangered at many outlets, our more experienced interviewees reported the declining quality of editing they receive. They describe how their pieces receive little to no substantive editing, especially the kind of developmental/line editing that was once the hallmark of what editors contributed to making criticism—and critics—better. For example, a mid-career critic, who has worked as an editor herself, lamented, “it is very rare to find those editors that will actually view [editing] as a collaboration.” Another mid-career critic said, “I actually don't write for a lot of publications because they don't have editors doing anything ... all these sites don't have the resources to help edit you, and it kind of sucks ... because ultimately, I want to get better at writing.” Another

mid-career critic with extensive freelancing experience identified this editorial malaise as a danger to the future of the profession. “How's the next generation of critics going to be formed and developed?” they asked, “Because now anybody can get a camera and mic and be like, I'm a critic without a byline, without an editor, without anybody having to critique them.”

However, as Danyel Smith's roundtable remarks referenced, even the most disengaged editor still wields tremendous gatekeeping power over what gets written and by whom. Add in the reality, as supported by our survey results, that most newsrooms are run primarily by white editors, and this leads to our interviewees experiencing myriad forms of bias in their pursuit of opportunities. A mid-career critic, currently on staff at a national media organization, observes:

If you look at major publications, you look at the masthead, who's getting to green-light pieces? It is still a lot of white people.... In my [ten-plus] year career ... I've only had two Black women and one Black man ever edit my pieces. Other than that, it's been cis-gendered white men. They're not the global majority so it's like, “Why?” Why is that the level of gatekeeping that happens? That's really what can impede a writer from going farther or from finding their voice.

To be clear, many of our respondents cited positive relationships they've had with white editors as well as negative experiences they've had with editors of color. As an established critic told us, “I hate to think that because I'm a Latina, I can only be edited by a Latina or Latino. I think that's absurd. I want to be edited by the best editor.” Nonetheless, as evinced in any other

“How's the next generation of critics going to be formed and developed?”

part of American society in which there is a stark racial disparity between those in power (in this case, editors) and those subject to that power (critics), the threat of bias is always present even if it doesn't manifest in every single exchange.

Our interviewees observed this bias in the unacknowledged assumption that white American values and norms establish what pieces of criticism are considered "universal," "interesting," or "serious" to editors. One of our mid-career interviewees, who has worked for a national media organization for many years, put it succinctly: "[editors assume] the broader listenership, viewership, readership, is the white gaze." For an early-career critic, this awareness led them to a sobering realization: "it was much easier to write about a white artist or a white genre than it was to even approach Black art or Black music because ... I knew that whatever person was going to edit me wouldn't be able to encourage the best out of me. They just weren't familiar with the artist or the genre." (A related issue we will discuss shortly: the lack of cultural competence arising from a lack of editorial diversity.) As an established writer we interviewed opined, these interactions are part of a far older set of racist roles that critics of color have to contend with: "People of color are the makers and white people are the analyzers and the contextualizers. I think that dynamic plays out in who gets to curate, who gets to criticize. [It] is a colonial dynamic."

These dynamics give rise to one of the most common concerns our interviewees expressed: gatekeeping and pigeonholing practices by editors that disadvantage critics of color while benefitting white colleagues. An early-career critic observed, "A lot of people aren't aware of how they come across or their knowledge limits. I see a lot of white critics writing about music that they don't have the repertoire for, but nobody's checking them because they're a white critic." A different early-career freelancer adds, "There were opportunities that I definitely pitched, really wanted to do, and they would be given to other people who definitely had more experience than me and just were trusted more [I]t just feels like the opportunities are so much more limited for Black and Brown writers versus white people [who] get to talk about Taylor Swift five million times or get to talk about every sort of niche, like alt rock bands. There's a lot more acceptance when it comes to that."

"To be at the mercy of white people to understand the magnitude of a Latin artist is sometimes really difficult to work through."

As one of our most experienced critics recalled, these disparities can start early. A self-described "outspoken queer feminist," she got her start writing for a college newspaper nearly twenty years ago:

The school newspaper staff was very, very white and mostly male for a lot of the time that I was in college. If I ever pitched anything, I would just get laughed at, like, straight up in my classes. It was just really frustrating. They wouldn't let me write anything if I ever pitched a story, and if they liked the idea, they would give it to a guy to write. I was like, "what in the *Mary Tyler Moore* is this bullshit?" It felt so crazy.

These issues seem especially rife around Latin pop music criticism. Despite the massive growth and popularity of different Latin music genres in the US over the past twenty-five years, our interviewees related various experiences with editors at mainstream music publications whose lack of familiarity with the genres and their key artists has made it more difficult to pitch pieces compared to musical artists working in more traditionally white/Black American genres. An early-career critic who specializes in Latin music recalled how they had an opportunity to travel for an exclusive story about a fast-rising group within the genre but their editors wouldn't approve the story: "I pitched that so hard because I never had an opportunity like that. [My editors] told me that it didn't seem like

a good fit for them. And I was like, ‘How can that be when ... they have a humongous fan base?’” Especially as an early-career writer, they find these experiences discouraging:

To be at the mercy of white people to understand the magnitude of a Latin artist is sometimes really difficult to work through. It felt like they’re gatekeeping this sort of opportunity from me—not that I feel entitled to any sort of opportunity—[but] it would have been great to have their support for me to be able to take this next step in my career, and that was definitely shut down.

These kinds of mismatches between critics’ expertise and editors’ preferences lead to writers having their initial pitches dismissed, only to see those same pitches get assigned to someone else later. An early-career critic we spoke to, currently working in the podcast world, related: “I’ve had artists I’ve pitched to cover, who then, a year later, I’ve sent the email to the editor to be like, ‘Hey, they’re coming back to town.’ And he’s like, ‘Oh yeah, I already assigned that. You should check ‘em out. They’re really good.’” A different early-career interviewee recalled a panel on music criticism they attended in college that featured a senior Latine music critic from a major national music magazine. According to our interviewee, this critic shared how they had tried to convince their magazine to do a major story about Bad Bunny early into his rise, but their editors repeatedly shot the pitch down. However, after Bad Bunny became enormously popular, the same editors decided it was now important to cover him but rather than assign it to the Latine critic who had been pushing for the story all along, the editors proposed sending a white, non-Spanish-speaking writer instead, with a translator. For our interviewee, still in college, contemplating a future in music writing, this anecdote stayed with them: “I will never forget that story. I just was like, ‘Wow, okay. That’s how it is. That’s how I have to prepare myself.’”

The other side of this coin is pigeonholing, where editors assign pieces based on biased assumptions about a writer’s identity and interests. An early-career critic of Latine descent has experienced this in terms of what they are approached to write about:

The only opportunities that I get handed are for Latin artists ... less so in pop music.

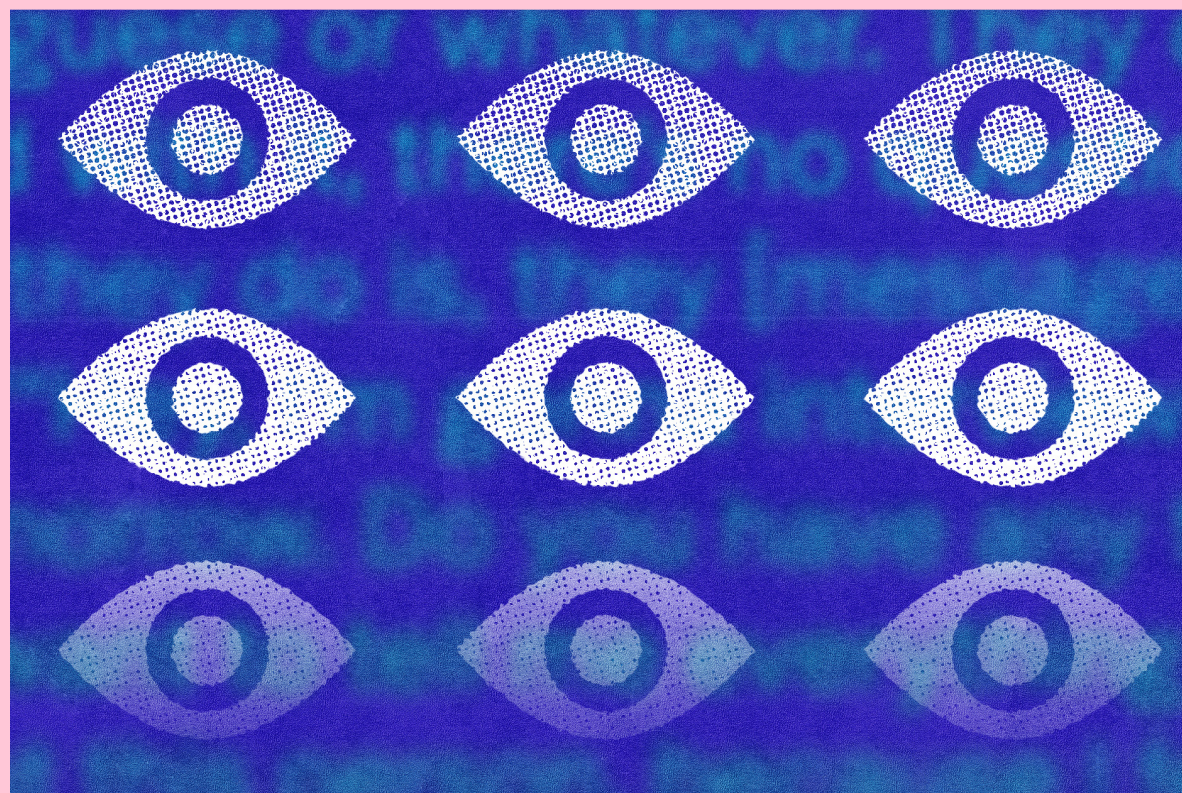
I’ve stopped getting hip-hop opportunities altogether. ... “One time [redacted] hit me up to cover an Afrobeat record. I know nothing about Afrobeat. I feel like they were assigning me it because I covered a [popular Latin music artist] song for them and they were like, ‘Oh, this person knows global music.’” ... I’m in the early stages of my career, and when I talk to people that are like, 10, 20 years into their career, they’re like, ‘Yeah, like, I had to deal with that for a decade.’”

As a mid-career critic suggests, “I think that there is a much bigger tendency for writers of color to get siloed in certain areas, because I think they’re seen as the *de facto* experts.” They have personally experienced this as a Latina who has often been asked to cover Latin music artists or recordings, “even though there are people that know so much more about Latin music than I do. I think there’s an assumption that we already know these things, but that’s not always the case.”

One aspect of pigeonholing is when editors assume that critics of color are *only* versed or interested in musical artists/genres that share their racial/ethnic heritage. A senior Black critic with many years of freelancing for different publications shared, “I always feel like white editors don’t think that Black writers know their music as well as we do ... Like they don’t think that we know Led Zeppelin or the groups of the ’70s or ’80s. I could write as well about Boy George or the Eurythmics as I can about Rakim.”

These are not just concerns in the print world either. While we discuss emergent platforms for criticism later in this report, this testimonial from a mid-career critic, who co-hosts a popular hip-hop podcast, speaks to how they feel pigeonholed by the general public, not just by editorial staff:

Black critics, if we’re not hanging up a Harvard degree ..., I don’t believe anybody would call us to speak about music in general. People put us in this category for hip-hop [and] think that’s all we know. ... We have spoken at universities because of the topics we talk about. We do all of these things, and to this day, I don’t feel like we are labeled as good enough critics, and I know that’s specifically because we’re Black and we’re just overlooked. I believe if white people did the same exact things [we do] ..., people would look to them



for everything. But because we're Black, because we're queer, we're often put in this box, and we're not put out there for the world to see.

Across our twenty-nine interviews, it was primarily women, queer, and/or trans critics who spoke to these issues of gatekeeping and pigeonholing; most of our cisgendered male-identified interviewees reported that they have not felt like their opportunities have been limited on the basis of their identity. This suggests there are either deeply intersectional dimensions to editorial dynamics—which aligns with what we know about entrenched social biases—and/or our female/queer/trans interviewees were more aware of these biases. In at least one case though, a mid-career critic of Asian American descent acknowledged, “Being an Asian man, I think, generally speaking, I haven’t really faced any barriers ... I feel like that’s a very different experience [compared to an Asian] woman.”

Looming around concerns around gatekeeping and pigeonholing is the issue of editors’ cultural competence. Editors familiar with certain genres or artists are often better at assigning reviews or stories to writers who have the expertise to do them. But when editors lack that cultural knowledge, it directly impacts what critics of color are empowered to write about. One of our mid-career critics, a Latine writer with years of experience in the Latin pop music world, related a common experience they have

run into with editors who lack knowledge about Latin music:

I think that working with an editor who is familiar with the culture or the artist that you’re writing about is very different from working with one who has no context for what the artist is. I think it influences both the content and the tone and the audience. Who is this piece being written for? Is the assumption that it’s a piece that the reader has no idea who this artist is, or is the assumption that it’s someone who’s Latino and might have some kind of context for who this is? I feel like I’ve had to fight to keep my voice a lot, to not turn things into an explanatory register for a reader who has no background or context in the topic. At that point, I’m not doing criticism, I’m doing an explanatory piece.

A different Latine writer—an early-career critic—mentioned running into the opposite problem, where white editors, unfamiliar with Latine community issues, would often cut parts of their reviews, claiming they were superfluous to discussing an artist’s recordings: “Something I would hear a lot is, ‘let’s focus on the music,’ especially if you’re trying to give ... cultural context.... They said, ‘This is not important.’”

This experience is reminiscent of the unchallenged “white gaze” mentioned earlier. The mid-career critic who invoked that concept

compared it to “diluting a pitch down and down and down,” so that white editors feel like it’s suitable for a presumed white readership. This critic argued, “That’s doing a disservice to the artist, any reader who is not a white person who might want to come to this piece, and is doing disservice to me as the writer who is trying to cultivate a voice for myself that I believe in and can stand by.” In these ways, an editor’s lack of cultural competence—or lack of support for critics who have that knowledge—stymies expressive freedom by removing or diminishing important nuance and context in people’s criticism.

Different standards around cultural competence also speak to issues of equity within writing staffs. For example, several critics noted that white critics are afforded more opportunities to write about music, artists, or genres that they’re not that familiar with. An early-career critic, currently working in podcasting, insists: “It’s really important for a culture to be examined by people from the culture. Shout out to *Vice* or whatever, but the idea of sending some dude from Idaho to go hang out with Migos ... it feels safari to me. Like, we’re gonna take you and put you in this different environment. It feels weird to me.”

A senior critic expressed their frustrations over how white colleagues seem to have an easier time getting approved for reviews or stories regardless of their level of knowledge in the musical world they’re writing about. Then, to add insult to injury, those same writers ask for help from colleagues of color to help with understanding that musical/cultural context:

I’m [not just] talking about white men writing about hip-hop. I’m also talking about white men writing about music in languages they don’t speak, whether it’s Spanish or Portuguese or whatever. They often move forward with it, there’s no question. And then what they do is, they [message] writers of color: “Hey, I’m gonna interview this person like, tomorrow. Do you have any tips?” Or, “Do you want to tell me everything you know about this person, because I feel like I’m above doing research for this gig that I just accepted?” That happens so much.

These testimonials reflect how editorial cultural competence—or the lack of it—shapes the conditions under which critics of color labor. They routinely navigate professional environments

where their expertise is undervalued or has to be moderated to appease editors while they watch white peers seemingly given freer license to write as they desire. These inequities not only touch on interpersonal dynamics but also reflect broader publication priorities around new or different content, much of which limits the craft of criticism.

The most often cited example of editorial pressure was not about gatekeeping or pigeonholing but concerns the turnaround time expected for writers to push out an album review. An early-career critic related: “I used to sit with a record for weeks at a time ... not be like, ‘oh, I gotta get the opinion out as fast as possible.’ My review needs to be out ten minutes after the album’s come out. How can you process something [that quickly]?” As a result, this critic has become more discriminating about the publications they pitch. For those that ask for quick turnarounds, “I don’t really want to pitch them. Why do I want to pitch to them to write like the most surface level review of something? That’s not interesting.” This loss of nuance, which several interviewees highlighted, was especially concerning for one mid-career print critic:

That’s my number one concern about where music criticism is going, or where it’s fading off from. I’m all about the nuance, and I feel like the more hot takes we have, and the more immediate ... requirements to have a response within twelve hours or six hours, or whatever it may be, that squeezes out any chance for nuance. That’s what’s bumming me out about it right now.

As our next section discusses, part of this dynamic is also tied to the rise of social media-driven content. The editorial dynamics reviewed in this section speak to a challenging, unequal environment for criticism that critics of color are forced to navigate in both their everyday interactions and long-term career ambitions. However, editors—important as they are—are not the only gatekeepers found within this ecosystem. Similar patterns of bias and exclusion surface in the decisions of outlets, publicists, and artist teams—figures who determine access to artists, materials, and opportunities well before a piece is written. The next section examines these additional gatekeepers and the barriers they create, before we turn to the technological forces that further complicate this landscape.

TAKEAWAYS

- ① Critics receive less editorial feedback and time to prepare. Layoffs and contractions in the media industry have impacted editors as well as critics. As budgets shrink and senior editors are replaced by more junior staff—or not replaced at all—the remaining editors are inexperienced and overburdened. At the same time, turnaround times are shorter than ever, with criticism expected within hours of release, resulting in fewer opportunities for critics, less time and attention spent on editing and nurturing them, and more superficial, less nuanced responses.
- ② Editors are predominantly white. Editors inevitably express biases in the type of assignments they green-light and the critics they work with. While white editors are not monolithic, their predominance in the pop music media field means that perspectives from communities of color do not receive as much exposure and critics of color do not receive the same opportunities as their white peers.
- ③ White culture and perspectives are still considered “universal.” Some critics of color have found it easier to receive assignments about white artists than artists of color, and others feel excluded from these opportunities because they are not seen as “experts.” Conversely, white colleagues are often given assignments about artists of color even though they have less relevant cultural or linguistic knowledge. Editors also may cut or “dilute” the distinct insights of critics of color to appeal to a presumed white audience.
- ④ Pigeonholing and discrimination are intersectional. Editors may make assumptions about a critic's interests and abilities based on identity, limiting opportunities and siloing critics—particularly Latine critics—into covering only certain genres. Meanwhile, white critics are given more latitude on what they write. These experiences of gatekeeping and pigeonholing are more common for women, queer, and trans critics than for cisgender male critics, and are both compounded by, and contributing to, a broader lack of cultural competence around music created by communities of color.

2.2 DIGITAL PLATFORM PRESSURES

At risk of overgeneralizing, if there is one common goal that cultural critics share, across backgrounds and interests, it's the desire to create thoughtful, impactful criticism, free of external influences that might compromise their voice. As the previous section discussed, editorial realities at print publications make pursuing that ambition difficult, if not impossible. That's one reason that, for decades, self-publishing has held such allure, from zines, blogs, and newsletters to podcasts and social media videos. Long-time music writer Hua Hsu could have been speaking for any of these eras of self-publishing when he described his own foray into the zine world as a high school student in the '90s:

I was inspired to start my own zine as a way to test out different poses, to figure out whether I was a dreamer or a cynic, a zealot or a snob, though my sense of taste was less confident. ... I didn't know it at the time, but I was participating in a long tradition shared by the young and alienated, people who were enamored with the fringes of culture. ... [Zines are] an expression of devotion—self-published, amateurish, and unconcerned with the bottom line.¹⁷

The key difference from the zine era is that today's forms of multimedia self-publishing don't just offer the allure of amplifying people's voices on their own terms, but also the opportunity to monetize those thoughts via direct advertising and/or sponsor/subscriber revenue. However, as our interviewees can attest to, the new media landscape isn't nearly as liberatory or lucrative as techno-optimists promote.¹⁸

If the editorial structures at print publications historically shaped what criticism was commissioned and legitimized, today's digital platforms impose their own gatekeeping systems of influence over critics and their content. Algorithmic inequalities create similar concerns as editor bias while click rates and search engine optimization results perform similar functions to what subscription numbers once did. As legacy publications adopt many of the same practices in an effort to stay relevant, the line

between print and social media content can feel as blurred as ever.

Multimedia platforms replicate many of the same outcomes as traditional publishers and editors, including constraining the scope of expression and conferring authority to some voices while diminishing others. The key difference is that rather than dealing with individual editors, much of this is being influenced by impersonal and opaque "engagement" metrics that impact both authoritative influence and income potential. For example, an early-career multimedia critic explains, "YouTube really started cracking down on the type of content that can be monetized, because a lot of stuff isn't suitable for advertisers If you said the F word, it was like, no monetization. Or if you mention murder or super graphic things, your video would be demonetized and even age restricted. A lot of topics are off limits."

None of this is to say that our interviewees, especially those working in multimedia forms, don't derive particular benefits from operating within the digital world, especially as it relates to creative autonomy. But, as many have learned the hard way, new media platforms may have disrupted older ways of making a living as a critic but they still sustain all-too-familiar hierarchies of power, except now they have to labor to attain visibility with less stability and institutional support.

One of our interviewees is a mid-career critic who, like many in our pool, writes music criticism on the side, with a more stable, non-music-related day job to anchor them. Curious to explore new media possibilities for their criticism, they have blogged, podcasted, and for the last few years, produced a digital web series on Black music. Right now, their series is primarily subscriber-supported, netting them a small income that was enough to encourage them to continue in the space despite realizing that the playing field isn't level, especially for Black hosts: "We see that there are white content creators doing the same thing that [we do], and they are getting so many likes and comments, and they making so much money from it. And we are doing this from the depths of our soul, spirit, all of that, and

¹⁷ Hua Hsu "American Counterculture, Glimpsed Through Zines," *New Yorker*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/comment/americancounterculture-glimpsed-through-zines>.

¹⁸ When it comes to content creation, our critics are most active on YouTube, but for promotional and social networking reasons, they also use Instagram, X/Twitter, and Facebook, with a smaller number exploring TikTok, Bluesky, Reddit, and LinkedIn.

we're not in the same algorithm." In other words, even when critics produce consistent work, the hazy nature of platform mechanics makes it difficult to understand how or even if that work will reach audiences, especially relative to white content creators who appear less encumbered by these issues.

The perceptions have been around for years, leading to lawsuits alleging that social media platforms are racially biased against Black and LGBTQ+ content creators. Theara Coleman detailed several examples for *The Week*:

Creators from marginalized communities have expressed frustration with how the algorithms appeared biased against them, robbing them of critical engagement. ... Creators pointed out that terms like "Black Lives Matter" and "Black people" were flagged as inappropriate by the automated moderation system. In contrast, words like "white supremacy" or "white success" did not trigger a warning. Black dancers and choreographers also alleged that TikTok's recommendation algorithm prioritized white creators who copied their dances without giving them credit.¹⁹

Several of the multimedia critics we spoke to addressed similar issues. "We want to be in those spaces where the major critics are. This is a podcast going on [many] years," shares one of our mid-career multimedia critics, referring to their podcast on hip-hop. Despite their show's longevity and influence, this interviewee feels that it hasn't translated into the same kind of success or respect they see accorded similar shows with white creators:

We've interviewed so many people, and people in hip-hop look to our podcast as a tool of knowledge. But in no way, shape, or form or fashion can we compete financially or visibly with our peers who aren't of color. People can tell us, "Oh, it's rap. We don't know much about rap, so we don't want to fund you all." But ultimately, it comes down to us just being Black and queer. And we just don't have opportunities everyone else has.

While print critics have to deal with siloing from editorial decision-making, in the social media space, critics are contending with the invisible hand of proprietary algorithms that raise or lower the visibility of their episodes and shows based on the intersection of their content and the identities of the makers. Moreover, being pigeonholed isn't just about what happens online since successful critics/creators can enjoy other opportunities outside the platform. Another early-career interviewee—a Black woman with a successful video series about gender, race, and popular culture—shares:

I would say that creators that look like myself don't really get opportunities. I'll see new creators who aren't of color just start their channel five months ago and it blows up and now they're hosting the red carpet at E! Network or they're at the Oscars. And I always wondered. Is it me? Is it my content? Why am I not afforded the same opportunities? I always try to create those opportunities for myself, but yeah, I just feel like people like myself ... don't get many opportunities to do more beyond the platform.

Pigeonholing isn't simply contained within a social media site or publication but has broader impacts on people's public status and work opportunities.

This is partly what makes navigating the modern social media ecosystem so alluring and frustrating for our interviewees: many understand the promotional benefits but they also resent feeling like it's a career necessity to do so. For example, a mid-career critic we interviewed acknowledges, "being very vocal and present on Twitter gave me a lot of opportunities ... I don't think I would have gotten [them] if I didn't have any kind of social media presence ... but simultaneously, I felt this pressure to sell a brand or sell my work." Likewise, an early-career critic shares, "I'm Gen Z. I see journalists my age do this all the time, and it frustrates me, because I'm like, 'Why can't the work speak for itself?' ... I don't want to be the outward face. I don't want people looking at me while reading what I wrote."

¹⁹ Theara Coleman, "How Content Creators Cope with Discriminatory Algorithms," *The Week*, May 16, 2023, <https://theweek.com/briefing/1023338/algorithm-ai-discrimination>.

The pressure to become a social media personality doesn't just impact multimedia critics. Increasingly, print publications and sites are asking writers to create video content to increase "audience engagement." A senior critic, currently on staff at a major newspaper, explains their predicament: "I don't like being on camera, to be real. I'll do the occasional segment, ... but that's not what I went to school for. I would rather not do it, and that's why I haven't.... I honestly resent having to do it." Part of their wariness arises from what they see as a gender double-standard, observing that at their publication, it's mostly been women who are asked to be on camera: "I did not see my white male counterparts under the same pressure to present themselves on camera."

Similar pressures apply to podcasters as the medium is shifting away from its audio-only roots in response to the growth of YouTube as a preferred platform for podcast consumption. Hosts and producers are now expected to record episodes in video form and to appear on screen. This increased visibility brings new concerns about safety that disproportionately impact critics with marginalized identities. An early-career critic in the podcasting space explains that being on camera might be fine for their co-hosts—"white dudes in their 40s"—but as someone both younger and transgender, they have experienced, "a lot meaner comments about my appearance, about the way that I talk, [and] that makes me very uncomfortable."

However, as much as some of our interviewees may resent these expectations to adapt to multimedia formats, there's also a feeling that adaptation may be unavoidable. The senior newspaper critic mentioned earlier admitted, with some resignation: "I'm also in talks right now to co-host a podcast that's going to be on video I think more of us have to get used to being on camera." A mid-career critic who has worked at some of the same publications concurs: "I absolutely feel that there's a pressure to be a personality and to have that kind of appeal I know that this is the way the world is turning, and I might just be a total Luddite at this point, but, yeah, I do think that there is increasing pressure for journalists to become influencers."

That last point is an exceptionally salient point for the contemporary pop music critic of color. As our survey found, whereas roughly 40% of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that "to be successful, I need to be a social media influencer in addition to being a

critic," that percentage *doubled* to over 80% for respondents of color with less than five years of experience in criticism. This may suggest that more experienced/white critics don't feel the need to be as active on social media because they already enjoy higher status and/or younger/critics of color feel that social media offers more opportunities for them than legacy publications.

Regardless, the pressures to incorporate influencer strategies for self-promotion weigh on many of our interviewees, including those whose work primarily appears in the social media space to begin with. An early-career critic with a modestly successful podcast on hip-hop music told us: "I just want to create, I do not want to be the person who then has to also be a social media manager That's exhausting to me, the idea of having to manage nine different places that I put stuff out at. I will use Facebook for work ... I have a Substack as well now [but] it's like another thing I have to do ... that's burning me out."

Other interviewees in similar situations were more pragmatic about their situations, treating social media as part of the overall work they do with their criticism. An early-career critic enumerated all the different platforms they're active on, including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr, joking, "content creating has always been in my blood" and while they acknowledge the amount of work this all requires, they didn't express any explicit resentment toward it:

If our income increases, I would love to hire a social media manager. I have saved all of our Instagram Reels, every single one that we've ever edited ... for the day to just post on TikTok. But for now ... in order to keep growing on TikTok, I think that would require too much extra time to keep consistent Instagram Reels posting, and we don't have the budget for that.

At the core of these tensions, especially for multimedia critics, is the feeling that in order to stay competitive with other content creators, people with podcasts or web series need to be as active on social media as possible. A mid-career critic who co-hosts a successful podcast explained how they and their co-host made the decision to pivot toward videotaping their podcast after feeling this was necessary to help their show succeed:

We're deep into it, a social media society in which everything you do ... needs to be on

social media For a very long time, I was so against it ... I always tell people, “I’m not an influencer,”... but being a podcast host, so much is required to be on social media, it’s insane. Season one of our podcast was audio only. Season two, we had to introduce video If we wanted to keep up with other podcasts and we wanted to keep getting paid for this, we needed to have a social media presence.

A mid-career critic who currently works in the tech industry and writes print criticism on the side could be speaking for many of our interviewees who felt similar pressures despite their personal ambivalence toward the push to be more influencer-esque with video content: “I did feel like, ‘if you don’t start doing this, you’re going to be left in the dust.’” An early-career print critic pointed to all the layoffs at legacy publications as a harbinger of a developing shift in hiring priorities:

I see this very much moving into everyone being siloed into a personal brand approach. The recent moves by the *New York Times** and *Vanity Fair* to axe their very talented, institutionally knowledgeable critics ... I would venture to say they are probably wanting to hire people who have large, pre-existing followings and who are really comfortable being on camera, because that’s where a lot of audiences are ... which translates into ad sales and all the other stuff that [publications are] looking for.

One irony that several interviewees drew attention to is how, despite more social media-savvy writers being hired, within traditional publications, the emergence of more digitally oriented staff is creating a two-tiered system of stature, with many women and critics of color being relegated precisely because they are often the ones given more of the social media work to do. A senior critic, who has previously worked at various national music publications, observes that editors at many of these outlets “treated their digital staff ... as secondary and as diminished.” In particular, they mentioned how at a legacy magazine they once worked for, “if you wrote for the website, you weren’t in the magazine, and therefore you weren’t, you know, the ‘real guys.’ [Editors] thought it was this cute accoutrement,

“We’re deep into it, a social media society in which everything you do ... needs to be on social media.”

and were slow to merge the two And ironically, the website was a place where women and people of color could write.” This is another example of the digital music media space may be more democratic in providing new opportunities for critics of color but it may also shuffle them toward a subordinate tier accorded less respect and lower wages/salaries.

This divide isn’t just within publications though, it also exists within the ranks of our interviewees, several of whom expressed skepticism around multimedia formats being the best vehicle for criticism. For example, an early-career critic who straddles both print and multimedia formats, believes:

Now everybody feels like ... they have a place of power to share their music opinions. Everybody thinks they’re an influencer and everybody thinks they’re a critic Everybody feels liberated and empowered to make a YouTube channel or share music opinions on TikTok or make Instagram Reels talking about music. As a result ..., a lot of people have a misinformed representation of what music criticism is.

This concern is echoed by a mid-career print critic who took particular aim at short-form platform content, especially on X/Twitter or similar sites in which most writing is constrained to just a few sentences. This critic relates instances where people will treat tweets about a record as being equivalent to a review:

To me, this is the same thing as me just talking with any friend about anything at a bar or at a concert and sharing our thoughts. Like, if that’s criticism, okay. I guess the fact that it’s public, because it’s

on Twitter, makes it slightly different. But I actually think you get into a dangerous zone if you consider that criticism I love going to record stores and seeing [record descriptions that staff] put on a sticker. That is great too, that's valuable. Would I consider that criticism? I am hesitant to do so.

As with several other interviewees, this critic works with students and their concerns around the conflation of short-form social media content being treated as criticism is heavily influenced by their feeling that platforms are “feeding into the illiteracy of the entire nation.” For that reason, they also opined that they are “not ... convinced that the content being produced on YouTube or Instagram Reels or TikTok, is anything that I would say is up to the standard of written criticism.”

Another mid-career print critic who has worked with college-level students shared a similar sentiment after a number of their students recommended video channel discussions about music: “There was a lot of difficulty in finding people who did music criticism in a video format that felt substantial. A lot of the examples were much more recommendation-based, you know, like, “here's what I'm listening to right now ... a very surface level discussion.” This critic specifically added with a touch of optimism: “I'm not the kind of person who's like, ‘none of this is real criticism.’ I just think that [for] substantial music criticism in a

video format ...there is a space to explore, needs to be filled.”

Unsurprisingly, none of our multimedia critics shared these sentiments—though as Part 3 will discuss, at least several of them expressed ambivalence with labelling the work they do as criticism—and there is no shortage of examples of multimedia content that is in-depth, nuanced, and critical, even if, to our interviewees' points, these are more the exception than the proverbial rule.

Overall, our interviewees describe an environment in which digital platforms have not eliminated the forces of gatekeeping and pigeonholing so much as shifted them from editors toward even more opaque algorithms impacting their opportunities for visibility and compensation. The social media space for critics may seem more open and democratic but as our interviewees share, inequities persist—if not widen—within this environment regardless of how much time or effort people put into navigating it. However, these dynamics don't operate in a vacuum either. The ability to publish criticism isn't just shaped by newsroom staff or digital metrics, but that process is also impeded upon by artists, publicists, and especially now, fan communities who all exert their own forms of pressure over a critic's access, tone, and legitimacy. The next section turns to these external influences and the ways they can also constrain the autonomy of critics.

TAKEAWAYS

- ① Digital platforms exert their own forms of gatekeeping. Critics who produce criticism for their own online channels may have more editorial control, but are subject to opaque, automated forms of pressure that constrain what they can write about and their earning potential. The criteria behind the algorithms that determine whose content is featured are invisible and subject to change without notice or explanation.
- ② Algorithmic bias disadvantages critics of color. White critics often receive higher visibility on digital platforms, even when they cover the same music and topics as critics of color. These dynamics create inequitable access to audiences, visibility, and income.
- ③ The rise of digital media exacerbates inequities. Critics increasingly feel pressure to be an “influencer” and to develop a personal “brand” in order to promote their work and stay in the public eye, spending increasing amounts of time repurposing or creating promotional content specifically for social media. This expectation of online visibility is especially burdensome for women, nonbinary, and trans critics, who receive more comments and judgments about their looks than cisgendered men. At legacy outlets, critics of color are often relegated to less prestigious and lower-paid digital roles, which may provide opportunities to break into the profession but are often a dead end in terms of advancement and earning opportunities. Additionally, attenuated attention spans and the dominance of brief social media and online video formats are ill-suited to substantive criticism, particularly for critics who work primarily in text-based formats.

2.3 EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

In a conflict-of-interest scenario that is becoming increasingly common, a mid-career critic was working on a story for a magazine that was sponsoring an upcoming showcase. The publicity team behind one of the invited performers was aware that the magazine was about to publish a piece about the artist, written by our critic.

The editor showed the piece to the publicist without my consent [The artist's team] said if I didn't take out a paragraph of criticism, reflecting on something the artist did ... they would refuse to play the showcase. It was extremely unethical. I refused to take out the critical part and I [told my editor], "if you take it out, please take my byline off of it too."

The parties eventually found a compromise that preserved enough of what the critic wrote to assuage their concerns around the integrity of the piece, but the whole affair soured them on the assignment. When the piece was published they did not promote it, saying, "I didn't post about it. I was like, 'nope.'"

In an era where "sponsored content" labels can be found attached to myriad print and multimedia pieces, conflicts of interest are likely to continue to rise. Our interviewees spoke openly about the kind of editorial interference they run into from artists and their PR teams, where both writers and publications alike are under pressure

to make editorial concessions in order to appease artists, advertisers, and underwriters.

However, the pressure to withhold or alter critical voices doesn't just come from the top. Especially in the last fifteen years, as social media tools have been weaponized to bully and harass people, critics are under increasing attack by online fanbases, aka "stans."²⁰ As our interviewees and others attest to, this has had a chilling effect on the state of criticism, especially in pop music, which has engendered some of the most fervent and organized fanbases, from BTS Army to the Swifties, from Barbz to the Beyhive, and many more. As Kelefa Sanneh put it in his essay, "How Music Criticism Lost Its Edge": "In pop music, unhinged fandom is not an unfortunate mutation—it's the essence," and he quotes an anonymous editor who has seen numerous writers politely decline to write reviews for

"Critics are under increasing attack by online fanbases, aka stans."

²⁰The term "stan" traces back to the 2000 song "Stan" by rapper Eminem, in which he raps about an obsessive fan. "Stans" now refer to overly invested fanbases of a particular artist, while "stanning" means someone—fans or critics alike—being seen as excessively enthusiastic about an artist or recording.

certain artists because, “the juice ain’t worth the squeeze.”²¹

In this section, we look at these various external influences bearing down on contemporary pop music criticism, especially attempts to weaken or remove writers who write anything critical at all. Negative criticism—and critiques of it—have been a part of music writing since its inception, but both the changing economics of criticism and rise of powerful fanbases have made the very act of being critical feel like a risk, leading some writers to preemptively self-censor to avoid the repercussions. A writer’s byline can increasingly feel like giving people a target, potentially impacting how critics write or what they write about at all.

The pre-internet ecosystem for music criticism relied on a delicate balance between at least four entities: *artists* and/or their *public relations (PR) teams* wanted exposure via *publications* who needed access to those artists and their advance recordings to assign to *writers* for interviews, reviews, etc. Depending on the situation, any of those parties might have greater leverage over the others to shape the editorial process around a piece, but, in general, this unspoken, fragile arrangement anchored the music publication world for decades.

However, as our interviewees note, the advent of social media in particular has meant that artists have far more avenues to direct their public image and to market recordings and performances directly to fans, thereby bypassing music publications as an essential cog in the PR machine. This has shifted the balance in influence over to artists and/or their labels, forcing publications and writers to navigate a new landscape of access that carries the inherent danger of compromising critical voices. An early-career critic, currently working on staff at a major publication, describes it as a “maze,” explaining:

I feel like now you can’t even ask the questions that are contentious, because [artists will] get upset that you even asked the question. And then their PR will be like, “we will never work with [your publication] ever again.” Before, celebrities or artists needed magazines to platform, but they now have bigger platforms than these magazines. Magazines [still] need these celebrities, so you can’t publish criticism in that way. It’s

also hard to monetize your website with commercial ads, when the people in those ads could be someone that you tore down in a review once.

Our interviewees had many anecdotes about their work being impacted by unhappy artists or publicists, with varying outcomes. A mid-career critic who has worked on staff at a variety of publications shared one of the most common examples: “I encounter so much resistance, even more now from publicists who want to vet absolutely everything, even though they know they can’t look at the questions ahead of time, yet they always ask.” This critic says “they can’t look at the questions,” presuming that writers or publications refuse as a matter of course, but other interviewees have less leverage to push back.

An early-career critic who depends on freelance opportunities shared, “I have noticed an uptick in people wanting to know interview questions and not providing access unless I give the interview questions or general topics, which I don’t like doing. I find that compromises my work.” This same critic, who also works on podcasts, relates several instances where they’ve been told to change aspects of a podcast episode to appease an unhappy artist or their PR team:

Access is what we need to do the show in a timely and effective manner, or at least that’s what’s been communicated to me. So there’s been a couple of times where PR people have expressed displeasure with things on the show and I felt pressure to change them internally from the people that I work with, but also externally from the PR people themselves. I’ve had to change titles of episodes because the artists didn’t like the titles.

Such pressures are exacerbated when outlets and writers alike have a financial stake in access to artists or their recordings. One of our established interviewees, who has written for many different print publications over the past thirty years, recalled when they were working on a story for *Complex Magazine* about an artist signed to Universal Music:

I was informed that Universal Music owns part of *Complex* and [a label representative] would probably want to read the story. This is after I accepted the assignment, and I

²¹Sanneh, “How Music Criticism Lost Its Edge.”

wasn't going to say no because I needed the money. I put everything in there that I would have put in there, and it didn't get changed, but the knowledge that the label would be looking at it was chilling.

As these examples hammer home, access is the key force shaping these encounters. Sometimes, it can dictate not just the tenor of a review or feature but even the assigned writer. A mid-career print critic observed that in some situations, publicists will look through a prospective writer's portfolio before agreeing to give a publication access to an artist: "The publicists have to approve of the writer. I think they are doing work on their end to ensure that the writer aligns with their message." A different senior print critic recalled an instance where, while interviewing an artist in a moving vehicle, a publicist didn't like their line of questioning and when the writer spoke to their editor later, they learned the PR team was "trying to get me taken off the story when I was in the van, when I was actively interviewing the subject, because they thought I had a vendetta." On the most extreme end, a mid-career critic observed that in addition to budget cuts, "Publications lay off critics because either they're afraid of response from fans or backlash from the artists ... It really hurts the music in the culture and arts industries overall."

Critics still command some sway, however, especially once they are able to build a reputation that swings leverage back in their direction. A mid-career multimedia critic explains how, when they were first starting out: "the managers and teams would ignore me," but now that this writer has made a name for themselves, "they all hit me up now. It's just very clout hungry. It's like, 'nobody fucks with you until everyone fucks with you,' is how I say it."

The music industry also controls access to recordings and this is another realm in which a combination of technological change and shifting leverage has made the work of criticism more difficult. In the pre-internet era, promotional versions of albums or singles would normally be sent to publications and critics months in advance as the printing of paper publications mandated a minimum lead time. The side benefit was that critics would have weeks or more to sit with a recording before rendering a review. However, over the past fifteen years, the entire industry's shift toward digital distribution has accelerated the pace at which all these processes happen. Online

publications can post reviews practically the instant they are filed—especially when no actual editing happens anymore—but in turn, labels can also release a flood of recordings with minimal to no advance warning. Whereas critics regularly had weeks to prepare for a review, most are now expected to file a full-length piece in a matter of hours after a release becomes available. A senior print critic resents how little time they are now given to listen to an artist's music:

Publicists, they'll be like "Hey *mi amor*, can you write about my artist's record? It's coming out tomorrow. We would love a review." And I'm like, "Well, if you were serious, you wouldn't be writing me the day before the record comes out. I would have to actually spend time with it." I think they're under the impression that we just fart it out, like we just fart out opinions, because everyone does it on social media these days.

However, if social media has had an impact on contemporary criticism, the bigger concern from our interviewees is less about shrinking lead time to listen to new music and more about the ballooning threat that online fandom poses to the mental health and safety of critics themselves.

If there is one area of contemporary cultural criticism that writers share the greatest concerns around, it's dealing with an online fandom that has weaponized social media to attack and harass critics. There have always been examples of fans or artists reacting negatively to criticism, but angry letters to an editor or a subtle reference in a song lyric are a far cry from facing an online horde of hateful comments directed at a writer's account or, even worse, the public sharing of a critic's phone number or home address (aka "doxxing"). Especially with a social climate that is already deeply polarized politically and where social media algorithms are programmed to intensify partisan opinions, online harassment has real-world consequences for critics in a way that defies comparison to earlier eras.

In one of the most sobering examples our interviewees shared, a senior print critic was doxxed while working on an investigative feature about a prominent artist.

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Once people caught wind that I was interviewing people, [the artist's] fans started following me on Instagram and then sent me weird messages. One of them exposed my address and my phone number and everything, and ... what's crazy is the story wasn't even published [yet]. I had to, in the middle of the investigation, move apartments. I had to change my number. I paid for a service to wipe my information from the internet.

This critic compared online fanbases to belonging to a cult: "I feel like the stan armies are just an extension of that. Everyone in this country

is looking for a god. And some people, they find it in pop stars." Other interviewees echoed this framing, describing parasocial fan/artist relationships as akin to religious fanaticism where fans/followers are easily roused to becoming aggressively defensive of artists and the music. A mid-career print critic opines, "I think standom ... replaced religion in a lot of ways because as religiosity went down, I think people still needed to funnel their obsessive parasocial relationships into ... a false sense of intimacy."

Regardless of fan motivations, aggressive online behavior toward critics has become seemingly de rigueur for the profession and multiple interviewees felt that women and

writers of color often take on the brunt of these attacks. The same senior critic above, who is also a woman of color, argues, “I have seen us get just the worst of the worst [treatment]. I’m not saying that white people don’t get doxxed or anything like that ... but ... we do get targeted.”

Another interviewee—a mid-career print critic who is a Black woman—observes that other Black women who write about hip-hop are especially at risk for harassment:

A lot of these fans that follow their favorite rapper are young men who nine times out of ten are not Black, and then they use reviews as a free for all to say some of the most heinous, racist, and sexist things towards the journalist. I think that’s why we are seeing a decline of women critics in hip-hop journalism ... because they will call you everything but a child of God if you critique their favorite rapper.

A mid-career Latina print critic also shares how “so many of us have gotten some terrible comments from stans, specifically ... critics of color receiving very hateful shit. I’ve been told to go back to [Caribbean country].”

A male, mid-career critic of Asian American descent shares a similar observation—“When I see the stuff that stans say to women, I feel like it’s way harsher than the stuff they say to me”—but still, because of the harassment he has personally endured he says, “I had to take my family off the Whitepages, so [fans] don’t share pictures of my house or [my family’s] houses or anything.” He also relates a case where, after giving a K-pop artist a negative album review:

There were tons of people sharing pictures of me and calling me a fat [Asian] pig, fat kimchi pig, calling me a gook, calling me all these racist terms My Instagram DMs were nonstop for several days of people saying I should die, which is kind of weird in the sense that Instagram people are on their personal accounts instead of something more anonymous.

These kinds of attacks are not just emotionally taxing but they can have larger career impacts as critics may avoid certain topics, artists, online spaces, or even career ambitions out of fear of being harassed. This is especially true

for freelancers who lack the greater security of a staff position. A senior, freelance print critic shares:

Fandoms have prevented me from writing about Nicki Minaj. I have a lot to say about her, but I don’t know when, if ever, I will say anything, because I don’t want to get doxxed. I don’t want to get harassed. I don’t want people calling my phone every second I don’t want my livelihood to be disrupted just because I have an opinion.

An early-career multimedia critic with a podcast/web series dealing with K-pop—a genre with notoriously aggressive fan bases—has experienced that disruption directly after mentioning on their show that a song had elements that felt a bit rote: “That fandom disowned me, and it ... affected our overall growth. A lot of people unsubscribed, stopped viewing, stopped sharing our commentary. We became blacklisted The several times that we had a lot of backlash have been some of the most traumatic moments of my life.” As we discuss in the Recommendations section of the report, multiple interviewees suggested that one way in which institutions and organizations can help critics of color, especially women, is to help train them on navigating online spaces with more safety as well as taking preemptive steps against doxxing or similar forms of fan retaliation.

Not surprisingly, this awareness of “stan armies” gives many of our interviewees pause about how, what, and especially *who* they write about. For example, a mid-career critic with a successful podcast/web series shares that they have become more self-conscious of their words or framing during podcast discussions:

I don’t think anybody can honestly say they didn’t think about the stans before they said something. Whether you’re still going to be honest or not, there still is this hesitation that’s like, “I don’t want to be yelled at. Let me say this differently, let me sugarcoat it,” which really is unfair to the critic ... But a lot of times I do soften my blows, because I don’t want to be doxxed and I don’t want the stans to tell people where I work ... where my office is ... [or] tell people not to watch the show only because I said I didn’t like an [album].”

Especially for multimedia critics, this kind of pressure becomes intensified when they are expected to appear on camera as this not only makes them more vulnerable for harassment around their appearance but it also raises concerns around doxxing since they are now visually identifiable. An early-career critic who works in both print and podcasting explains the difference between the two mediums for them:

Writing-wise, I don't really care. I think because I'm young and I've grown up on the internet, when a Beyoncé stan account is sending me a death threat on Twitter ... it doesn't really phase me. I think podcasting-wise, I am a little bit more careful, because it's very easy to find who I am or see photos of me, especially with social media videos being posted, and I've been on the receiving end of a couple of really terrible hate waves.

Similarly, a mid-career print critic makes it a point to avoid posting their work in online forums—"I try not to wade in those waters"—and admits they would take more time to decide whether or write about artists with the most notoriously aggressive fan bases:

If I was asked to write something about Taylor Swift, I would think twice about it. I've written about Beyoncé once, and the whole time I was white-knuckling at the computer, being like, "Oh God, I hope the BeyHive doesn't come after me." There are certain artists that are third rails, it feels like right now, and I think it would make me really consider if that potential maelstrom would be worthwhile.

These examples—of critics avoiding discussing or writing about specific artists—were more common than interviewees acknowledging that they might change or soften the critical angle of a review or piece. Nonetheless, what is being described is part of a larger erosion of public understanding or acceptance of the function of criticism itself since, as others have said, anything short of uncritical praise is treated as a personal

or moral attack rather than reflecting taste or analysis. This is intensified for critics of color, especially because when they write about artists of color, there is this expectation that they are supposed to only write positive things, as a form of convoluted racial solidarity. An early-career print critic observes, "I think there is an expectation—that I don't think white critics have—that if you are reviewing a person of your ethnicity, race, and stuff like that, you have to be complimentary because you don't want to make them look bad in front of white people or the world."

Despite these forces, multiple interviewees shared they are still willing to stand on their words, regardless of the consequences ... at least some of the time. As a mid-career print critic told us: "I've never had a moment where I thought, 'I need to tweak this sentence, because I don't want the stan army to come after me'.... The only way that you're going to make the stans happy is if everything is 100% glowing. But I think you owe it to yourself as a writer and as a critic to be honest in your evaluations." Likewise, the mid-career multimedia critic who mentioned "softening my blows" on their podcast also insisted, "Sometimes I just do not care. It's like, 'This is what I want to say. This is exactly what I meant.' And if the stans want to fight me, they'll just have to fight me." Lastly, at least one senior print critic feels that the turn away from more negative forms of criticism has its benefits: "I think it's good not to be so critical and so biting. That kind of trope, it's an old, crusty lady critic with her cigarette, right? That's how you always imagine it: all angry. I mean, they sound angry and they were nasty. They were In my criticism at least, I always would try to find something good."

While editors, platforms, artists, and fans each exert influence in distinct ways, critics can experience these forces simultaneously, often without clear boundaries between them. In the following section, we turn to how critics understand their own professional trajectories within this landscape—how they enter the field, sustain their work, and imagine a future for criticism amid overlapping systems of constraint.

TAKEAWAYS

- ① External influence is increasing. Critics feel more pressure from artists, advertisers, sponsors, and fans who want to censor, control, or otherwise alter their criticism. Artists and/or their marketing teams may place conditions on access to artists or their work or even blacklist specific critics or entire publications from any access. Alongside increasing partnerships between publications and music industry sponsors, conflicts of interest confront critics on multiple levels.
- ② Labels constrain time spent on criticism. As noted in other sections of the report, the music industry's shift to instantaneous digital distribution has meant record labels give critics shorter lead times to listen and respond to music than ever before. Critics are expected to generate reviews in a matter of hours, constraining the depth and consideration they can give to any one piece of music.
- ③ Online fandom has weaponized social media to attack critics. Fans unhappy with a critic's opinions can harass them online or in real life, from sending threatening messages to doxxing. Women, nonbinary, and trans critics of color receive the worst treatment, which is emotionally taxing and impacts their mental health. Some critics simply opt not to cover artists who have particularly strong "stan armies."

3 PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

IF PART 2 EXAMINES the various professional and social forces that impact the labor of music criticism, this next part turns to how our interviewees understand their professional trajectories. Here, we center people's reflections on how they entered the field as well as what it's taken for them to sustain their career despite the obstacles mentioned in Part 2. Most importantly, we asked critics to imagine what they see as the future of music criticism in all its potentially messy, troubling, and promising permutations.

3.1 ENTERING INTO MUSIC CRITICISM

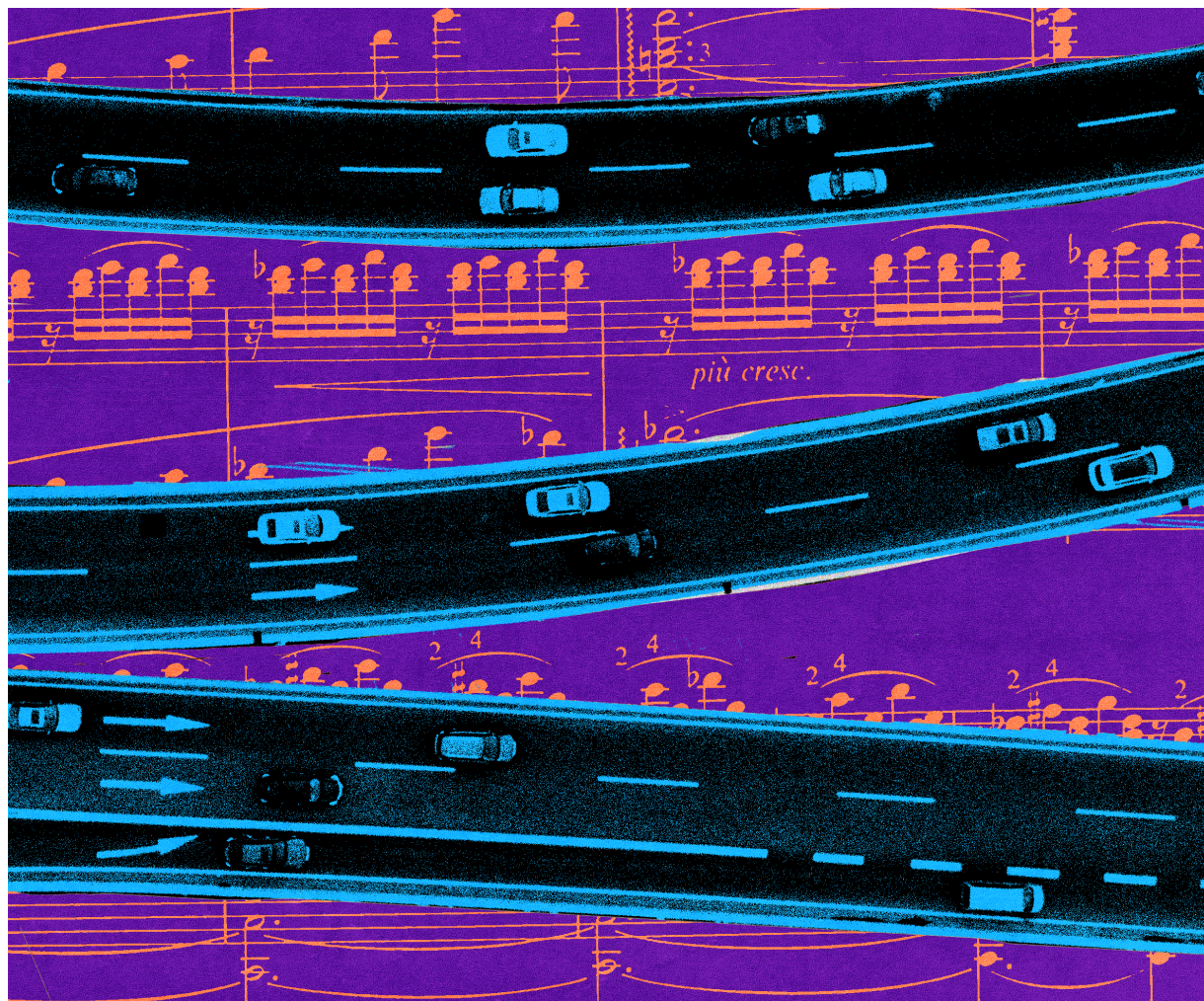
As most cultural critics can attest to, there is no “set” route into the profession. Especially among pop music critics, most don’t receive specialized training in the craft, but among our interviewees, there are two broad routes that helped with their starts: starting on their own, especially via self-publishing, and/or being invited to contribute music criticism via a trusted mentor or colleague. In either case, the key moment of recognition and transformation was when people realized that their personal opinions on music had potential as a form of public practice.

Given how many people form passionate relationships to music and artists as teenagers, it’s not surprising that many of our interviewees began penning criticism when they were high school age. An early-career print critic shared how “writing for *Pitchfork* was probably the first job I ever wanted in life,” inspiring them to join their high school newspaper where they began writing music reviews as a teenager, continuing onto their college paper before moving into freelance work. In some cases, writing reviews began as a means to an end, usually for show tickets or music advances/promo. A senior print critic recalled how they started writing criticism while working at their college radio station: “I realized that if I went to shows and wrote about them, I could get tickets for free I didn’t have any money but I wanted to experience culture, right? So [I] started through that and interviewing bands at the radio station, and I realized I really liked it.”

While other interviewees also mentioned creating criticism via high school or college outlets, it was more common that people began by self-publishing reviews or similar content around music. A different senior print critic mentioned being in high school when, “I started a zine. I wrote music reviews and actually interviewed [local] bands as well. I was very much mimicking the music magazines that I was reading, but [my zine] was where I felt most confident.” Yet another senior print critic found their early footing through both examples: “I actually had a reviews column in my high school paper where I would review albums ..., but even before that, I was part of LiveJournal communities and forums online I always wanted to be a critic ... it always came very naturally to me.”

Especially for our interviewees who came of age in the 2000s, the plethora of self-publishing options provided many with an initial platform. A mid-career print critic shares, “I would tell people, even when I was twenty-four or twenty-five years old, ‘Oh, I will never be a music critic.’ I didn’t even think I could get bylines anywhere. I just thought I was just a blogger.” Likewise, an early-career multimedia critic recalls:

Around 2010, 2011-ish, I started my own blog and I also had a YouTube channel attached to it I was using the family computer and our cable television to rip various clips from award shows or a talk show or something, and I would just repost the clips on YouTube ... I was [also] uploading reviews of Kanye



[West]'s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* to [he and Jay Z's] *Watch the Throne* ... I guess you could say I was a music critic at that point.

For several of our interviewees, part of their motivation to write criticism was the lack of diversity they perceived within the community of critics. For example, an early-career print critic—a woman who writes extensively about electronic dance music—told us, “If you look at the landscape of criticism now, even in electronic music, broadly speaking, it’s all run by white guys. So I felt like I needed to be in there because if I wasn’t, then who was going to do it?” A senior print critic was invited to start writing reviews after critiquing local papers for their lack of writers of color:

I used to write in fanzines and stuff like that, but I never really thought of that as

music criticism ... [but I] started noticing that our local city papers weren’t really writing about Black artists ... and so I challenged a lot of people who were editorial at [these] spaces ... and they were like, “Well, then just write a story [for us].”

Likewise, a mid-career multimedia critic was inspired to start creating criticism after being frustrated by the lack of cultural competence in some of the outlets they were reading at the time: “In 2010 ... I was reading *Rolling Stone* ... and they were reviewing Fantasia’s [*Back To Me*]. The way they reviewed it, I was like, ‘She has a song called “Collard Greens and Cornbread,” like, are y’all not understanding the depth of this?’ They really bashed it.” Tired of seeing R&B “getting disrespected,” our interviewee was spurred to start a blog before eventually creating a podcast/web series devoted to discussing R&B.

TAKEAWAYS

- ① Teenage music fandom. Some critics found their way into the profession because they developed a love of music as a teenager and started writing for high school and/or college newspapers, or started their own zine.
- ② Online self-publishing has helped to diversify the critical landscape. The rise of blogging in the 2000s and later the advent of podcasting and online video provided many present-day critics with a relatively easy way to begin making and circulating criticism, whether compensated or not. Many critics of color began creating criticism to cover music that wasn't getting attention in existing publications or to address the lack of cultural competence in music coverage.

3.2 THE ROLE OF MENTORS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

While many of our interviewees took serendipitous, self-guided paths into their careers, many also credited the role that mentors played, both in encouraging their interests in music writing as well as helping them navigate the proverbial waters in their early years. A senior print critic recalls a high school teacher who inadvertently put them on a path that led to a thirty-plus year career:

When I was in high school, I wrote this article about Led Zeppelin ... and after the article came out, I had this white English teacher who I loved to death. She was like, “I read your Zeppelin story and it was really good, but you could have gone deeper Led Zeppelin took a lot from Black musicians.” I didn’t know any of this. I didn’t know about the blues and Little Richard and all of that. I started going to the library and digging a little deeper and trying to find out what was going on. To this day, I praise [her] for showing me the way ... she guided me.

For a different senior print critic, they had similar praise for a popular music studies professor they had in college:

I really can’t overstate how influential [her] class was on me She had us reading Ann Powers. She had Elijah Wald come play the banjo for us one day in class and talk to us about his books. I don’t think until then I had really seen that people could do [music criticism] as a career in this kind of actionable way, until she really put them in front of us. I think she saw something in me and told me, “You have ideas that could be applied in this kind of setting.”

For others, their initial mentors were music writers and editors shepherding new writers into the flock, so to say. A senior print critic credits a pair of local editors who helped them get their start:

I’m like, seventeen, I’m very excited about everything. [This editor is] asking me, “Yo, can you write?” And I’m like, “I can write rhymes.” He’s like, “No, can you write a record review?” He told me that he was starting a local zine called [redacted] and he was looking for writers. Working with [these two editors], they were the ones that ushered me in and gave me a chance to express my opinions. I didn’t have a computer, so I would write record reviews by hand and then call them and dictate the review over the phone. And then a month later it would show up in a zine.

Mentors were especially important in helping interviewees with the challenges of working in a field dominated by white men. A senior, Latina print critic, who has mentored many junior writers, credited several writers and editors who shaped her trajectory:

Jessica Hopper was a major force for me. I think she helped a lot of women because that was her objective. She wants women to feel empowered to tell their stories or share their perspectives. Julianne Escobedo Shepherd was also so important for me. When some fucked shit would happen—and it happened a lot—I would go to her and Jessica and be like, “What is going on?” And it was really important to have women who had been through it already who could tell you, “No, you’re not crazy, this is real.”

A mid-career Latine critic also credited their editors at an important Latin music/culture outlet: “That definitely felt like a boot camp for me in terms of what music journalism is and what criticism is. I learned how the business works, what happens when a publicist pitches you, and how to figure out my voice [It] gave me the space to figure out who I was as a critic.”

Once writers started producing criticism, editor relationships were key to helping people

sustain their involvement as well as grow as critics and professionals. While Part 2.1 addressed the difficulties in editorial relationships, many critics have also benefited from enthusiastic and supportive editors who have been catalytic forces in propelling their careers. A mid-career print critic recalled that early into their freelancing years, “I got a call from this wonderful man ... at *Pitchfork* and he was like, ‘You should start here and apply for jobs here, and you should totally do this.’ And I think getting noticed in that way was incredibly odd and validating. And suddenly I could write for *Pitchfork* and that sort of ... opened new doors.”

As also mentioned earlier, layoffs and cutbacks in newsrooms has meant that the time editors spend with critics feels ever diminishing. For that reason, a senior print critic praised an editor they’ve worked with at a national media organization for the amount of care they received from this person:

[He] will take your piece and tell you, paragraph by paragraph, why he changed something or why he suggests changing something. Having been an editor myself for several years prior to freelancing again, that takes so much work. For people to go out of their way to do that is a gift. I try and really value those relationships with editors as much as I can, because they’re very hard to find.

This same critic also praised another editor at a major music website, because, “I know that she won’t let me publish something that isn’t reflective of the best work that I can do. She has always been super motivating.” Likewise, an early-career Black print critic praised a Black editor they worked with early on for not just editing their work, but teaching them how to edit:

I was learning how to be a writer and editor under him. All of the guidance he gave me ... I think he was also preparing me to be edited by white people, honestly. He would be ... really stern, like, “You need to get this, you need to understand” ... He would

be patient with me, but also insistent. His guidance helped me acclimate to white editors because that was the majority of [my editors].

Other interviewees mentioned how mentors helped them weather difficult situations. An early-career print critic mentioned an editor who trained her how to “stay strong when you’re investigating things like domestic violence and sexual violence in the music industry, which was really hard because when I started doing it ... people are coming at you, you lose friendships, and people are calling you a piece of shit because you’re not waiting for the police reports.”

While these kinds of stories about mentorship were more prevalent amongst our print critics, for most of our multimedia critics, traditional mentorship—i.e., from senior people, guiding them in the field—was less common. Instead, they credited more indirect forms of mentorship for helping them on their paths. For example, an early-career critic with a web series on K-pop shares that when they created their channel almost ten years ago:

My inspiration ... was another YouTuber who went to [prominent music college] ... And I was like, “Ooh, I can do that.” ... For a handful of months, [my channel] was just a hobby. And then I met a songwriter who really helped me learn about the process of songwriting and really gave me an in-depth look That really jump-started my deeper knowledge of understanding the process of K-pop.

In the time since, this critic has had to navigate the particularly thorny world of K-pop fandom in which even small comments on a video can lead to creators being “cancelled” by fanbases. In order to avoid similar situations, the critic learned from a host of people, including those who leave them comments on their videos:

I’ve had conversations with other music critics or journalists in the industry ...

during these K-pop conventions, like Kim Young-dae, Ivana Moras, Crystal Bell, Elizabeth de Luna. There are a lot of women out there supporting other women that reach out and are like, “Hey, it’s really cool what you’re doing. We’re inspired by your work.” But I think the biggest thing shaping how I critique is the feedback from fans In a way, maybe [our] mentor is the comment section.

Regardless of the style of mentorship people received, interviewees stressed that these relationships were almost all informal rather than part of an official/structured mentorship program in which people are deliberately paired with one another for a set amount of time. While these kinds of mentorship programs exist for other kinds of arts writers/critics, there has not been a similar tradition for pop music critics, and, as we discuss in the next section, Recommendations, this was one request that came up repeatedly from both survey takers and interviewees.

Even if formal mentorship programs don’t currently exist for pop music critics, interviewees mentioned the relevance of internships and fellowships that assisted their professional growth. For example, internships at national outlets, even if the responsibilities—transcribing, fact-checking, etc.—were not directly criticism related, the experiences still provided important insights and access to editors, other critics, artists, and the workings of the music and media industries. One senior print critic recalled an internship with a well-known writer at a national music magazine: “I would transcribe his interviews, which is a job that doesn’t exist anymore. But he would say, like, ‘David Lynch released an album. Do you want to interview him?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, of course. I would love to do that.’ But through that summer in New York, I met people from *Rolling Stone*. I met people from the *Village Voice*. And so I started writing for them too.” A mid-career print critic and multimedia critic recalled a similar set of opportunities through internships at several outlets:

I was a journalism major in my undergrad ... I tried a lot of different internships, and the internship that really gave me the light bulb moment was interning at MTV News ... this is when MTV News still existed. Seeing real journalists debate and have these conversations and put the pen to paper and flesh out their ideas so robustly ... gave me hope that I could do it, too. I grew up reading *Rolling Stone* and *XXL* and *The Source* and stuff, but I never really thought I could do it. After that I interned at [redacted] ... and my intern advisor and my manager there, I had always kept in touch. Once I graduated, I noticed that [they] became the managing editor of *XXL* so I tapped in ... and asked for freelance opportunities.

As with mentorship programs, there has not been a major track record of music criticism-oriented fellowships though several interviewees did mention the (now defunct) *Pitchfork* fellowship, which was also a quasi-internship at the publication. An early-career print critic spoke about how landing that fellowship was pivotal in their professional pathway:

I hadn’t written about music, and then I applied for the *Pitchfork* fellowship. Thought it was like a long shot. And then, as I was doing the fellowship and writing ... I just didn’t really know or fully comprehend that this could be a career that people like me could have. Getting that fellowship at *Pitchfork* changed that. You weren’t paired with a mentor, but through being there, you could get mentorship.

However, this same critic noted that this fellowship no longer exists and based on our research, there are currently no formal fellowship programs designated for popular music critics.²² This suggests that, as with mentorship programs, there is both a need and opportunity for more organizations to support such programs that would benefit aspiring music critics.

²² Fellowships exist for classical music critics, namely those awarded by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism.

TAKEAWAYS

- ① Mentors matter. Many critics of color were inspired to enter the field by teachers, other writers, and editors who saw their potential, encouraged and guided them, and provided early opportunities. Mentors who can validate their particular experiences are especially important to critics of color in a field dominated by white men. This is especially true of editors who take the time to help a critic improve their criticism, guide them through difficult situations, and make them feel cared for and supported.
- ② Multimedia critics find less direct forms of mentorship. Because multimedia criticism is relatively new, critics working in this space are less likely to find more senior mentors. They sometimes look to other multimedia critics as role models or to followers who comment on their content for feedback and guidance.
- ③ Most mentor relationships are informal. None of the critics we interviewed had participated as a *mentee* in a formal mentorship program. Most mentorship relationships develop informally in school or on the job. There is also a dearth of fellowship and internship programs for music critics.

3.3 CRITICISM AS IDENTITY

In speaking to over two dozen working critics, we asked about people's perceptions and conceptions around criticism. One of the more striking dynamics concerned people's ambivalence towards the term or identity of "critic" itself. While a sizeable majority—80%—of our interviewees identified as a critic, either now or at some point in their careers, the remaining 20% resisted the label, even if the content they create sometimes or even mostly crosses into critical territory.

For example, several interviewees—most of them multimedia creators—felt more comfortable describing themselves as "storytellers." An early-career critic who produces a web series explains: "I don't identify as a critic. I see myself more of an archivist and a storyteller because I don't typically offer my own personal opinion or critique on much or many of the stories that I cover." Likewise, another early-career interviewee who primarily podcasts echoes: "I personally think of myself as a storyteller Even in a review of a show or an album, I think I try to get across ideas and feelings in telling the story of a thing as opposed to being 'it was good or bad.'" In both examples, part of the discomfort that people have with the label "critic" appears based in the idea that criticism inherently involves some form of judgment or criticism, i.e., "Was this thing good or bad?" This is one reason why a different mid-career podcaster told us, "I have opinions. I wouldn't say I'm a critic though, 'cause I'm not really looking to criticize ... but I will critique things at times, but I'm just a fan like everyone else, is how I would say it." Similarly, another mid-career podcaster, who is also a musician, told us:

When I first started my journey, I tried to stay far away from that critic title. But as our podcast got popular ... I realized that that's exactly what I was. And it's crazy, because I only wanted to stay away from that when it came to music ... because I am a musician as well. When I do other things, like I criticize movies, I prefer to be a critic. I am a huge critic on Rotten Tomatoes, but when it came to music, I was like, "No, I'm not a critic. I'm just a consumer." And people were like, "No, you're definitely a critic."

Especially in light of what our interviewees shared in the section on external influences regarding online fandom and concerns over harassment, it's easier to see how people might feel that the conventional label of "critic" is akin to painting a proverbial target on one's back. At the very least, as Kelefa Sanneh wrote, there now exists, "a broader belief that it [is] bad manners to criticize any cultural product that people liked, whether it be a pop song or a superhero movie or a romance novel." He goes on to compare this attitude to a phrase "repeated by kindergartners and, less excusably, by people who are no longer kindergartners: 'Don't yuck my yum.'"²³

However, for other interviewees, criticism is more than just the rendering of opinions. An early-career print critic explains that for them, "Criticism is in between having an opinion, having evidence to back that up, and then being able to theorize about ... what an artist or what their work represents, not only within their trajectory in their career, but also in a larger context, socially. Like, what is their work reflecting about society right now, reflecting about the intersections of that artist's identity, where they come from?" The relevance of being able to explain context, through informed knowledge, is also how a senior print critic defines criticism for themselves:

I think criticism of the arts is taking a critical, educated, foundational look at works that are put out by artists for consumption ... always seen through the lens of ... impartial knowledge. And so by having that knowledge, the critic is supposed to be able to say, "This is good, this is bad, this is worth your while, this is not." And then people can accept or reject criticism.

The idea that the title or label of "critic" is something that requires some level of knowledge or training was echoed by a senior print critic who sternly argues:

I think there's a difference between writing just to rabble-rouse, and writing for an intentional point. I think of podcast people ... who have decided that they're cultural critics, but have no training. They try to

²³ Sanneh, "How Music Criticism Lost Its Edge."



intentionally just send up flames One of the biggest banes of my existence in this contemporary landscape is people who are not real journalists or real critics, stepping into that position as if they are, and then muddying up the waters for everybody.

It should be noted: there were not strong divides around perceptions or definitions of criticism between the print and multimedia critics we interviewed. In particular, ambivalence around the label was expressed by interviewees across different forms. To wit, a mid-career print critic told us, “I initially did not believe myself to be a critic [because] I believe that is a title that is earned I do think in journalism, you do have to work towards being a critic. It is a different skill and mindset.” It was only after seeing their name appear in a literary program’s list of critics of color that the interviewee shares, “this is the moment where I figured out that I was a critic,” via outside recognition/validation rather than internal perception.

Others shared a similar ambivalence. Another mid-career print critic explains that, “something

about that title has always felt big to me I’ve always been impressed by really young people who call themselves critics. It just feels like such, like a big, weighty thing to attach to yourself I don’t even say that I’m a writer in the flesh that often. I just say ‘I write occasionally.’”

For a handful of our interviewees, these concerns were also informed by what one early-career Black print critic describes as “the burden of being the only Black person” within a newsroom or freelance pool. This ties back to the relative lack of representation within media organizations since, as this interviewee states, “If you have more Black people in the room who have more knowledge, then it’s not bad that you are missing a part of this knowledge,” but in many of the situations they find themselves in, as one of the only critics of color at a publication, they experience “so much pressure” to “represent my people. I need to represent my history. I need to get it right so people realize that they also need to be getting [it] right.” In contrast, they suggest, “white people have the opportunity and the freedom to have a niche and we don’t.”

TAKEAWAYS

- ① Critics are sometimes reluctant to identify as “critics.” They may see themselves more as storytellers or archivists or fans, although they also express opinions and make judgments. This may be related to “criticism” being increasingly associated with negativity in polarized online spaces. Other critics expressed ambivalence about identifying with the term because it felt too “big” or “weighty,” or was a moniker they felt had to be “earned.”
- ② Criticism is more than opinions. Criticism involves not only rendering judgment but also supporting it with evidence, theorizing about what music means, and contextualizing it within a broader social context. Critics have some level of knowledge or training in the field and are not just “rabble-rousing.”

3.4 THE FUTURE OF CRITICISM

Our conversations with working critics highlight a set of larger stakes that not only concern the changing perceptions and purpose of criticism in society but also speak to whether criticism—as we have known it—even has a future. As the previous sections have detailed, there are myriad reasons for our interviewees to be pessimistic for what that future might look like—especially financially—but despite those challenges, most of the critics we spoke to are still resolute in their desire to continue producing music criticism and encouraging others to do the same. In this section, critics share cautious perspectives on where music criticism could head, followed by a series of action-oriented recommendations made by our interviewees around how institutions can help bring about that better tomorrow.

Our interviewees identified three broad trends that they think will define the future, beginning with the continued decline in paid criticism opportunities. We have addressed this issue at length in Part 1 but it's important to restate the grave concerns that our interviewees have regarding the long-term sustainability of a career in criticism. As an early-career multimedia critic bluntly stated: “Even now, I don’t think of [criticism] as something that’s sustainable long term for most people. A lot of this exists because people care enough to keep doing it, not because the system supports it.” Their last point drives home how the interest in creating criticism is still there, even though—as other parts of our report make clear—the infrastructure to support that interest has withered away in just this past generation.

Meanwhile, a mid-career print critic is also skeptical around criticism being a “viable career option,” pointing out that, “You can’t look at things and be like, ‘oh, they’re getting better?... Even long-established [publications] are folding or getting out of the business. I mean, the *New York Times** [cut] down critical staff... It’s going to be harder for people to get a name for themselves, to establish long careers.” While this critic was generally negative about the future, the one example they described as “encouraging” is that, “it is easier than ever to start a channel or something,” suggesting that self-publishing at least makes it easier for people to produce and circulate criticism. Along with many of our previously shared testimonials, these perspectives

suggest that while our interviewees still view music criticism as culturally vital, its continued existence will turn toward more individual effort as institutional support continues to fade.

The trend toward self-publishing ties into the second major trend that our interviewees identified: the continued atomization of criticism in which individual writers, set up on various social media platforms, will take precedence over publications. In other words, the belief is that people interested in criticism won’t be following specific magazines or websites, they’ll be following specific writers/creators via newsletters, video channels, etc.

This is partly conditioned by the aforementioned consolidations transforming the publishing industry. A senior print critic warns that with examples like Universal Music buying part of the music site *Complex*, similar outlets may simply function as “vanity magazines” for larger corporate entities rather than sites for critical

“A lot of this exists because people care enough to keep doing it, not because the system supports it.”

discussion or engagement with music. As this critic warns: “leaving it up to corporations and big outlets, we’ve seen where that gets us. They’re not really taking care of culture or criticism.”

Another senior print critic described the same dynamic within the flows of everyday editorial practices, arguing that “music criticism is going to flatten and eventually become more of a cookie-cutter channel just to promote music,” especially when publications want to maintain “a

good relationship with publishers, publicists, and [PR] teams.” Under such conditions, they suggest, true criticism is a risk for these publications out of fear that writers might “put out something mildly critical” of an artist or project tied to entities that outlets are in business with.

According to a senior print critic, these forces help make self-publishing criticism all the more attractive: “With these big layoffs and the lack of opportunity for people to write about music, I think it’s created a vacuum that people are filling with genuinely independent projects that they’re doing. I see a lot of people making zines. I see people on Substack. I see people talking about making their own blogs.”

As a result, a mid-career print critic sees this trend as an example of music criticism becoming more “bespoke and splintered,” specifically citing the newsletter platform Substack as a key example: “even though there’s a lot of bad and just unedited writing on there, there are a lot of respected critics moving over there or putting their most potent pieces over there, because you can move on your own prerogative.” In an inversion of the previous model—in which writers self-published to gain exposure—this critic believes that more critics are going about things in the other direction: “I see people who are making a name for themselves within the publications they work at who are getting ready to move to those spaces.” In other words, the newsletter isn’t where a writer starts, it’s where they aim for once they have gained enough of a reader base to make a stand-alone newsletter viable, even lucrative.

This shift fills many with ambivalence. A senior print critic shares: “I love reading different journalists’ newsletters. I hate that people feel like they’ve been siloed into doing that though. I don’t think that’s necessarily good for the landscape, that it’s very splintered in this way.” Likewise, an early-career print critic finds the sheer number of newsletters to follow to be burdensome—“it feels like there’s Substack fatigue ... the market is so saturated”—but for them, they perceive this as being where things are headed: “I think the future of music criticism is critics being influencers and celebrities and having their own platforms and monetizing them.”

In predicting where the atomization of criticism may eventually lead, a senior print critic

shares, “I think criticism is increasingly going ... the way of a luxury item. There are plenty of people who value critics, but they will tend to be people who just value art in general If the general public is not as invested in reading ... if they’re not as invested in paying for music ..., who’s to say they’re going to value criticism? Because they already don’t value the art.” Even though this comment is pessimistic about society’s overall embrace of the arts, it does at least suggest that there is still an audience for criticism. The key transition is away from mass consumption toward a more intentional audience, eager to seek out criticism that they trust, respect, and/or appreciate.

That idea is echoed by a mid-career print critic offering a slightly more optimistic view on what a more niche audience for criticism might portend, using publishing in *Pitchfork* as an example: “It’s cool that it’s kind of a guaranteed way to get some eyes on an album review,” they said, adding that both fans and casual readers often express appreciation in the comments. “It’s always like, ‘Thank you for doing this,’ ‘Thank you for that. I learned a lot.’ ‘Thank you.’ ... Is there a new crop of kids that really like reading that? ... I think there is a young readership.” For that reason, a different mid-career print critic was one of the few to see a potential opportunity to create forms of writer-owned music publications that offer in-depth, nuanced criticism:

I think that there’s been a few things that have happened where people have realized that, if you do good work, people want to read it, people will care if it’s good Writer-owned platforms [like] *Hearing Things*,* *Defector*, and stuff that, I think that’s encouraging. People care about good writing. I think that people are going to crave substantial things, and that’s what I am banking on, as far as having hope, it’s people realizing that they can’t just absorb and consume rot.

The writer-owned platforms they mentioned have cropped up in the past few years and while they still have to contend with the basic challenges of securing sustainable funding, they at least offer a different, writers-first model opposed



to the ad-centered, publisher-led system that has crumbled over the past decades. If, as other interviewees suggested, the social media era has burnished the opportunities for select individual critics, then writer-owned collectives may be an ideal kind of middle-ground for both established and emergent critics to join and invest in as a way to sustain in-depth, nuanced music criticism. This is precisely the kind of writing that our interviewees fear is quickly being lost in the present and near future.

One significant outcome of the social media era is that now, as a senior print critic opines: “Everybody is a critic Because of social media, everybody can give an opinion about anything and be widely seen.” On the one hand, they feel that, “I think that’s good and bad, because this brings different voices to the conversation,” but they also think it has displaced traditional music critics as an “arbiter of taste” and that, “most people don’t have the music knowledge to be able to be properly critical The work of a critic is to be able to articulate ... their opinions in a coherent fashion and unfortunately, I do think it’s a dying art.”

This idea—that criticism requires some modicum of training and knowledge—was shared by others, all of whom also agree that this is precisely what is being lost in favor of short-form, reactionary “hot take” opinions shared via social media. As a mid-career multimedia critic observes,

regarding how people fixate on album review ratings—but not the actual reviews—“They just see the screenshot of the *Pitchfork* score and they’re done. No one’s actually reading why *Pitchfork* thought this.”

As discussed in the section about online harassment that writers may face, this has also contributed to a changing tone within criticism, with less critical and complex ideas being circulated. An early-career critic observes that as critics lose leverage with musical artists and labels, it can lead to them behaving more like influencers and essentially functioning as part of an artist’s publicity machine:

It’s like you need to be an influencer who’s obsessed with your subject and write positively about them to continue forward. It’s like no one’s going to have any actual thought or engagement with albums and songs without the fear of being blacklisted. It’s just so crazy to me. I don’t think you can be smart anymore. I don’t think you can be nuanced anymore.

A senior print critic put it more succinctly: “I just feel like people expect music critics to be PR.” One consequence of this may be in the weakening of ethical, conflict-of-interest boundaries. A different senior print critic intonates that they know several writers who behave, “like besties of the publicist. They get gifts. They get flown out places

without disclosing. And I think, ‘Why are you an influencer? You’re a staffer?’ Especially at a time when public cynicism lends itself to perceiving most elements of society as corruptable, the need for readers to be able to distinguish between independent, genuine criticism versus sponsored content is as important as ever.

That kind of discernment is also increasingly being made difficult because of the latest technological development that threatens to remove complexity and insight within the critical landscape: artificial intelligence. Especially with the explosive, seemingly overnight popularity of tools such as ChatGPT over just the past two to three years, AI isn’t a speculative or hypothetical threat but one that writers feel is destabilizing an already fragile ecosystem by accelerating existing trends toward less nuanced writing and the devaluation of critics’ labor.

“I’m definitely afraid of AI just essentially killing the whole industry,” says an early-career multimedia critic. Their feeling is that if publications are so concerned with “ad clicks” by publishing pieces on “the most hot topic thing”, then it also makes it easier to produce those kinds of pieces “for free with an AI thing ... and that scares me.” In this sense, if music criticism is increasingly bereft of critical content (due to multiple pressures detailed above), then publishers have fewer qualms about using AI-generated writing as a cost-saving measure. After all, how would we expect readers to know the difference between AI “slop” (i.e., generated text, audio, or video) and the forms of nuance-lite criticism that writers are already incentivized to produce?

At least for the time being, most of our interviewees feel that AI isn’t capable of producing the kind of intellectual insight and value that critics provide. An early-career print critic insists that when it comes to reporting for example, “I don’t feel threatened by it. I just don’t. Not to say that I won’t in the future [but] I don’t even see ... it being able to do what I do: to talk to people and to get down to their story and what they’ve been through, and to do it in an empathetic way, in an

ethical way.” For the same reason, a senior print critic also says, “What AI cannot do is it cannot go ... and interview me. You need someone who has criteria and knowledge and is able to string a story together.” On the criticism front in particular, one mid-career print critic believes,

We’re already at the point where AI is ubiquitous ... but one thing that I think AI is incapable of doing is curating and having taste ... Even with so many facets of this industry that we fear might get taken over by AI ... there is still going to be a desire for people who are willing to curate and be ... I hate the word “tastemaker,” but that’s kind of what it is.

They went on to reflect on how, “throughout my career, I’ve been asked, ‘Where do you hear about new music or where do you find these things?’ And it’s still primarily people. It’s still friends ... There’s still going to be a want for that, even with everything else potentially changing.” In addition to taste, another mid-career critic emphasized that AI doesn’t have feelings, a prime driver of criticism:

AI is never going to take my job, because [it] can’t describe the euphoria of having three cigarettes back to back and a coffee on your ledge on a Sunday morning in your new YSL pants ... that’s the human experience that we aim to capture and calcify in our journalism, in our criticism. So maybe it’ll be able to take our job if we’re just trying to write a press release or a bio, but you’re always going to need people to be those historians and show you, emotionally, spiritually, where our culture is headed, and machines can’t do that. Because they can’t pull from that well, ever.

In fact, if anything, a mid-career critic sees an unexpected opportunity for critics, especially because so much AI-generated content now

“AI taketh away but perhaps it giveth too, however inadvertently.”

saturates popular media: “there’s just so much slop out there now that ... there’s confusion about discerning what’s real and what’s not right now. I think that there is going to be more of an urgency for real people to sift through these things and tell you, “okay, this is legit [and] this is not ... worth your time.” In other words, as more things—including music—becomes AI-generated, the need for critics to help people sort through all that proverbial “slop” becomes more relevant, not less. An established critic agreed: “I feel like music critics are actually in a very unique, advantageous position where we become AI investigators. Today I’m seeing people in my timeline trying to figure out if Deftones used AI in their video. So we’re like AI hunters now.” AI taketh away but perhaps it giveth too, however inadvertently.

Taken all together, our interviewees describe a landscape where present and future music critics, especially those of color, will need to contend with continued issues of access, visibility, and editorial freedom. People will still be drawn to create criticism but without strong, collective interventions, future critics will continue to be beset by challenges to their long-term livelihoods, their ability to craft nuanced opinions, and their ethical integrity. And yet, despite people’s pessimism—even cynicism—about these forces, most of our interviewees are still resolute in their desire to not only pursue their own criticism but also to encourage others to do the same, however different that landscape may look in the years to come.

TAKEAWAYS

- ① Paid opportunities will continue to decline. Criticism will continue to be created because it is fueled by independent passions, but the outlook for making a sustainable living is bleak.
- ② The critical landscape will become more compromised, fractured, and niche. As large media industry corporations consolidate, criticism at such outlets is increasingly compromised by conflicts of interest and contracting resources or instrumentalized as publicity. Critics will continue to turn to personal newsletters and social media to publish independent work, resulting in a more atomized environment characterized by individual celebrity and an unwieldy plethora of options. Meanwhile, the audience for criticism is shrinking in a society that places less value on art and music, but niche communities continue to “crave substantial things,” supporting not only independent critics but also worker-owned publications that emphasize depth and nuance.
- ③ Criticism is less critical. The combination of uninformed social media “hot takes,” shortened attention spans, online harassment, and increasing conflicts of interest will continue to pressure critics to become more like publicists, constraining the complexity and freedom of their arguments.
- ④ Concerns about AI. With criticism already negatively impacted by the shift toward online platforms, the next wave of concern is over AI replacing writers with AI-generated “slop” in the form of generic “clickbait” to drive engagement. Others feel AI can never replace the human element of criticism—reporting what it’s like to experience music, to interact with other people, to have an emotional life. They feel the rise of AI gives critics an important new role in helping people identify fake content, marketing ploys, and propaganda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IN ORDER TO ADDRESS the challenges facing contemporary pop music critics, one of our interviewees told us: “You have to hear what the people you’re working with actually want, and you have to cater to their needs.” With this in mind, we have consolidated the suggestions that our interviewees shared with us to create a set of action-oriented recommendations for improving the landscape for critics of color. These recommendations coalesce around four key areas: **increasing financial support, providing training, promoting community building, and generating research.**

These suggestions address more than economic precarity as interviewees consistently

linked financial instability to other experiences involving pigeonholing, gatekeeping, harassment, and discriminatory behaviors: conditions exacerbated by the lack of diversity in editorial and decision-making ranks. While increased access to financial, educational, and moral support is needed across the board, interviewees stressed that interventions must be intentionally designed and distributed with equity in mind. As one critic hoped, these efforts could contribute to a “more robust and functional media landscape” that could “accommodate a litany of voices working at publications that could also pay them a living wage.”

1 INCREASE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

As the traditional media industry continues to collapse, interviewees emphasized that critics need **direct, flexible financial support**. In the short term, that may mean grants or fellowships but in the long term, many felt that music criticism would be better served by moving outside a strictly for-profit orbit. Interviewees recommended the following:

PROVIDE DIRECT FUNDING TO CRITICS AND CRITIC-LED PROJECTS

This can include **grants, fellowships, and project-based awards** that provide writers with the editorial freedom to create criticism about what’s meaningful to them. As an early-career multimedia critic explains, corporate publications are motivated to produce journalism and criticism motivated by monetary value, which “makes you not write the things that are important. It makes you write the things that’ll pay. So direct funding ... is the most important thing.”

The goal is to provide a **baseline of support** that allows writers the creative flexibility to write about music on their own terms. As a mid-career print critic put it, what writers need is “money

to be able to work ... so they don’t have to worry about paying bills Cover their basics.” A different mid-career print critic asks, “is there a way that we can make an industry-wide, emergency savings fund?”

An important dimension to this recommendation is that writers not be asked to produce anything specific in exchange for support. A mid-career print critic feels what would be ideal is “a patronage sort of system where ... there’s **no expectations** ... just get out of the way.” As an early-career print and multimedia critic added, “A grant that has very little barrier to entry could be quite useful. I think critics of color—more often than not—are not given the same opportunities as white counterparts. And because of that, we’re paid less, right? We’re not getting the same amount of [opportunities], so there’s less money coming into our bank account.” Another early-career print critic, who recently received a modest cash fellowship in recognition of their writing potential, was appreciative of the award’s “no strings attached” philosophy: “with that money, you can do whatever you want. One of the things they [told me] ... is that you can use this money to pay yourself to write music criticism.”

PROVIDE IN-KIND SUPPORT FOR FREELANCERS

Interviewees had insightful suggestions regarding other ways that writers, especially freelancers, can be supported via **subsidized access to professional services**, especially those related to legal advice, accounting, health insurance, and mental health. A mid-career print critic asks: “Are there ways in which critics can be connected to a group of lawyers who are doing pro bono work so that we can help people get paid before net 30, net 45, net 90? What are the ways in which [we] can help critics if they’re not supported by a *Rolling Stone* or *Marie Claire*?” They envisioned this as a community form of mutual aid that would help prevent “critics of color, especially, from being underpaid and exploited.”

SUPPORT LARGER SCALE AND MORE AMBITIOUS WORK, INCLUDING ENTIRE PUBLICATIONS, ESPECIALLY WRITER-OWNED OUTLETS

While this cluster of recommendations would require more substantial forms of monetary investment, interviewees strongly felt that support should extend beyond individual, piecemeal articles to instead **fund essay series, books, multimedia projects, and even entire publications**. An early-career multimedia critic explains that they’re looking for funders to, “invest in our stories. A lot of us want to do things beyond the platform. We want to do things on a grander scale. I would love to have a docuseries I would love to tell those stories beyond my YouTube account, but I don’t necessarily have the funds for a major production or all that it entails to get those stories out there.” As an example, another early-career multimedia critic is currently producing a larger scale video series but they already know that the cost to produce that content will eclipse whatever revenue those videos might bring in: “We’re probably going to be pouring a couple thousand dollars into this series and at this point ... we won’t be able to continue this series after one or two videos There are so many different ideas

that I think I and a lot of other people have that we could do, but we don’t have the budget to do.”

At the most ambitious level, interviewees also suggested that Critical Minded or similar organizations could invest in **starting their own publication or subsidizing existing ones** with a host of salaried and freelance positions made available to critics of color. This is obviously no small endeavor though it doesn’t need to be in the form of a traditional magazine. As previously mentioned, there are existing, writer-led outlets for cultural criticism such as *Hearing Things** and *Defector*. They join non-profit and public-good models for journalism like ProPublica, The 19th, and Futuro Media, all of which provide necessary alternatives to compromised corporate models based on advertising and social media monetization. Whether funders want to invest in existing publications or create their own, the goal is to support organizations that propel long-term careers in criticism while also expanding our collective imaginations regarding new models for criticism-driven publications.

ENSURE FUNDING REACHES CRITICS OUTSIDE ELITE OR COASTAL NETWORKS.

As our interviewees stressed, it’s not enough for support to exist if it’s not being equitably shared across the diversity of potential recipients. One mid-career multimedia critic put it powerfully:

I live in Los Angeles, and I know that there are resources. I see them every day. So, of course, they’re going to go to [people like me]... No one is going to Alabama to speak on panels and to tell people about these resources. No one is going to Nutbush, Tennessee, no one is going to these places where the talent lies, but the resources don’t Somewhere in the world, in a small town, there are critics of color who know nothing about any of these things When you find those people and help them become something, that’s when you ultimately change the world.

2 PROVIDE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES

As noted in both our survey and interview data, most critics enter the field with little to no formal training in journalism or criticism. As such, many interviewees expressed a strong desire for **accessible, practical education**, not only in the craft of criticism but also in navigating an increasingly hostile media environment. They envisioned these opportunities as workshops, seminars, panels, and mentorship programs, but also as **widely available resource guides** that could reach critics regardless of geography or institutional affiliation. Interviewees specifically recommended the following:

TRAINING ON EDITORIAL AND INDUSTRY FUNDAMENTALS

This can include preparing emergent critics on the art of pitching, working with editors, negotiating rates and contracts, and producing different kinds of criticism. Especially because most critics of color have historically not had the same access as white critics to informal knowledge and social networks, having organized training resources can be one way to level the proverbial playing field.

These resources could also include **ethics training**. One established critic shares, “I would have loved a crash course on how to deal with publicists, including ethics ... because there’s some people who—they’re not bad people—but they make really shady, ethical decisions.” A senior print critic concurred: “the increasing push for [writers] to have this kind of outward-facing, influencer-presenting appeal, while also adhering to the ethics and standards of

journalism, are getting blurry for some people.” To that point, in the current climate, where writers are expected to navigate everything from relationships with PR teams to the lure of sponsored content, gifts, free trips, and similar conflicts of interest, this kind of training can restore and sustain integrity within the ranks of critics.

Regardless of the specific focus of the training, interviewees also asked for **portable, low-cost resources**—including guides, tool kits, and recorded sessions—that can reach critics located away from major urban centers or who are otherwise unable to attend in-person programs.

SAFETY AND DIGITAL SECURITY TRAINING.

One specific area of training that multiple interviewees discussed was the need for tools to help navigate the pitfalls of social media engagement, especially in light of the harassment directed at writers. As one mid-career critic put it, “We need assistance on how to safely be a visible person in a high-surveillance world.” This is especially pertinent for critics of color, women/nonbinary critics, and other writers from marginalized communities that are already more likely to experience online attacks. Some of our interviewees have learned these lessons already after being “cancelled,” doxxed, or dealing with other forms of online harassment. At the very least, there is no shortage of people with firsthand knowledge who could lead such an endeavor.

3 BUILD COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Even during the most halcyon days of music publications, the bulk of music critics were independent freelancers. Critics of color especially often report feelings of isolation and disconnection; as one survey respondent wrote, “This field is hard enough. I would love to see more community, connection, and mentorship, even just commiseration amongst writers.” To address these issues, interviewees suggested:

FACILITATING MENTORSHIP AND MUTUAL AID

Interviewees desire opportunities where critics can acquire and share advice, resources, and encouragement without fear of competition. As our previous section on mentorship suggests, many critics have benefited immensely from having more veteran writers and editors shepherd them along their career pathways. A senior print critic emphasized how important it is for young critics of color to gain “mentorship and having editors teach them. I couldn’t have my career if it weren’t for [editor] Danyel [Smith teaching] me so much. I think it’s really important ... to help them so they can actually do the work ... [with] experienced critics and editors of color helping them along.”

In the vast majority of cases, these forms of mentorship have been informal, which historically leaves critics of color and women critics at a disadvantage when the majority of editors and senior writers are more likely to be white men. To address this, funders should consider creating or supporting *formal* mentorship programs that 1) pair mentors and mentees together for a set period of time, with a clear set of mutual expectations and obligations, and 2) compensate both mentors and mentees for their time and participation. A senior print critic pointed out that informal mentorship can be draining for mentors: “In the past, I was doing a lot of mentorship, and it took its toll ... because I just felt like it was overwhelming and I wasn’t getting anything in return.” However, when they worked as a mentor through a university-sponsored program, they received a modest honorarium for their time and expertise, which made them more enthusiastic to participate and more interested in doing so again.

Notably, there are any number of mentorship programs that exist for other areas of journalism, such as programs run by Theatre Communications Group* and the International Association of Art Critics, usually pairing more experienced peers or editors with early-career writers, but as best we know, no such program has existed for popular music critics. Therefore, there is an ideal opportunity to create such programs, especially as they would potentially generate interpersonal ties that, over time, can also forge a foundation for larger collective and communal networks of support.

The desire for mentorship is also tied to a general call for better access to experienced critics and editors willing to openly share information or answer questions via in-person or online panels and talks. These ideas tie back to previous recommendations for better training resources but with a greater emphasis on community building so that these benefits of knowledge and experience are not limited to just a select handful of individuals.

CREATING CENTRALIZED, MODERATED ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Whether appended to a more formal training or mentorship program or existing as a more informal community, existing social media tools such as Discord, Slack, or similar platforms can provide spaces for critics to ask questions, share information, and on the most basic level, find and support one another. This is especially useful for critics of color located outside of major urban centers where finding other local writers may be more difficult. As noted though, such an initiative would greatly benefit from having *paid moderators* organizing the spaces as a way to limit the kind of dysfunctional behavior, bad actors, or bots that too easily pervade un-moderated online environments.

Such forums would also be an ideal way to enact another suggestion interviewees made: providing structures for pay transparency, including shared information about outlet pay rates as well as guidance on negotiating compensation.

HOSTING EVENTS, PANELS, AND CONVENINGS

Interviewees also recognize the importance of events and gatherings as occasions to convene and commune with each other, whether in person or online. As one established critic noted, a trusted community space could be especially valuable for emerging voices, offering a place to “talk with other critics in transparent ways about what they’re experiencing and commiserating and battling ideas around.” Beyond morale, interviewees saw community building as a pathway toward collective advocacy and improved working conditions.

As one highly visible proof of concept, the twenty-five year old Pop Conference*—a popular

music studies convening for scholars, writers, journalists, artists, and fans—has been an important resource for likeminded critics to meet one another in a shared space, even if only once a year.²⁴ Though the early years of Pop Conference* attendance were dominated by white men, over time, the event has become far more diverse and inclusive. However, one of the main challenges it continues to face is that pop music *scholars* generally have better access to travel-related funding whereas pop music *critics*, especially freelancers, do not. As such, any potential new convenings must take into account the financial burden of either travel costs or the technical costs of hosting online events.

²⁴ For disclosure: Critical Minds has supported the Pop Conference* with funding since 2020 and report co-author Oliver Wang has been involved with the conference, including as the lead organizer in 2021, since the event’s beginning.

4 CONTINUE AND EXPAND RESEARCH

Interviewees emphasized that research into the community of critics functions as a form of intervention itself. While reports such as these may not deliver immediate material benefits, several critics described participation as affirming and validating. One early-career critic shared, “It’s super cathartic ... knowing that this information will be protected and treated with care.” Another critic said that the interview was something like a “therapy session,” which “helped a lot ‘cause I did vent a little bit to you, you know?”

Interviewees recommended that organizations take the following actions:

CONTINUE PRODUCING FIELD-LEVEL RESEARCH

More research is needed to document working conditions, inequities, and emerging threats to criticism. One critic said they saw research as “getting these stories out there and sharing knowledge, and I think knowledge is power.” Another saw the research as sending an important message: “There are so many ways that this industry is gatekept that ... I feel like the only thing that can be done is kind of exposing that,” they said, adding, it’s important to let people know that the work of “widening those platforms so that everybody can show up to that table—it’s far from over.”

EXPAND RESEARCH BEYOND CRITICS

Record the views and experiences of editors, publishers, and platform operators, particularly around sponsored content and editorial pressure. Although our critics acknowledged the growing presence and need for sponsorships from brands and corporations and the concomitant dangers to freedom of expression (especially among multimedia critics), they were not able to give us more than an anecdotal sense of the prevalence of such pressures. Perhaps a study of editors and publishers would shed more light on this topic.

STUDY THE IMPACT OF FORMAL MENTORSHIP AND FUNDING PROGRAMS

While informal mentorship was widely credited as supportive, few critics had participated in structured initiatives. It would be useful to study the effectiveness of formal mentorship programs. While our findings suggest that mentorship is an important component of the critical ecosystem, it is unclear if programs formalizing these relationships would have the same impact as more casual, organic connections.

AFTERWORD

By LATESHA HARRIS

THE MUSIC CRITIC IS DEAD.

Napster lanced him before dying on its own sword. The failed tycoon from New York shot him on the way to the oval throne. Charli XCX, the uber-obscure artist no one gets, held hands with the folk behind *Sesame Street*'s shuttering as they poured gasoline into his wounds. Condé Nast's *Pitchfork* lit the match; for only five dollars a month, you can wear the Critic's skin over espresso martinis while the girls confuse Tate with Addison and ultimately agree RAYE is the truth.

Though I have been a critic since five, telling my mother I didn't appreciate being left in the care of strangers as she juggled two jobs, criticism didn't pay until the pandemic. From intern to salaried editorial assistant, I spent a virtual year and a half at NPR's farthest-most void: music desk. We stood in the corner of their party, crowding the water cooler with wisecracks and generating a unique strand of criticism between life's interludes. For the first time ever, I flew beyond the poverty line and did not sacrifice my body for the sake of resource extraction.

Someone thought my mind had value. Receiving money to write about music materialized less as dream and more as an extreme privilege.

NPR Music surrounded me with brilliant editors and critics, chiefly Daoud Tyler-Ameen and Ann Powers, who treated my voice as an equal part of their choir of genius from jump. Accordingly, I ground my fingers to bone to make myself worthy of this attention—be as smart as everyone assumed. Imposter syndrome arrived early. Constantly, I felt undeserving until I realized “worth” wasn't the determinant.

Daoud and Ann taught me the alchemy of concentration. They showed me the eternal why; its importance; and how to express my mind like a master of literature. The detailed, hands-on technical training Daoud provided remains the most generous gift I have ever

received. For hours at a time, I hung on his every word as he explained creating flow, musicality through line edits, essay structure, ensuring cohesion of ideas, and the beauty of a structural note. Second, of course, is Ann leveraging her long-standing career and reputation as a leading female voice in music criticism to throw me a bone. She championed my writing to the extent of platforming it on *Turning the Tables*, her flagship essay series turned anthology. I lived as an eager apprentice, high on wisdom and craft—Raphael to their Perugino and Verrocchio. The more Daoud fed my mind and fine-tuned my pen, the more Ann secured professional opportunities that honored my growth as a writer and music critic. Their mentorship gave me the permission to go deeper—a rare freedom, as evidenced by this report's findings.

When counting the number of equally generative training grounds for aspiring music writers, the list comes up short.

This is dire, mildly speaking.

I am one in a billion bright children who love music. My peers grew up to meander around supermarkets, disappointed with the anonymous aux, dreaming of what they'll belt on the drive home. They spend their only night out negotiating power with the master of the booth: “Read the fucking room,” they shout through a heinous bass drop, this explosive burst of anger popping their guilt bubble of leaving a newborn at home. They may never pick up a pen, much less become a renowned writer, but they represent irreplaceable pillars of their micro-communities. Furthermore, they reflect the report's prophesied trends as criticism becomes more independent and niche.

If I didn't win a corporate contest—the application only available to me because of america's deadliest epidemic since AIDS—I never would have developed my writing. How much genius, I have to wonder, is left abandoned in intellectual purgatory, waiting for the right encouragement?

In my mere five years of being a music critic, I have watched a global digital attention economy devalue its definition, practice, and reputation. Criticism thrives on sustained education and unflinching observation. It is a purposeful meditation between artist, listener, and environment; it can't be done in isolation. Between people, ideas, history, identity, and much more, music criticism facilitates radical connection. To claim this discipline without guidance and training—though the resources necessary to enter are gatekept and rendered inaccessible, especially for critics of color as evidenced in this report—normalizes the erasure of context.

Before we were critics, we were orators sharing information that would not otherwise reach our communities. We were elders, leaders gathering everyone on the back stoop to share a meal and spin the new Paquita la del Barrio record. Music dynasties operate according to a similar fashion—Tupac's mentorship to the Outlawz, Queen Latifah's Flavor Unit, and the evolution from Birdman to YMCMB reflect the value of education through community. Shared love of music is a natural human instinct; for eons, rhythm and melody have acted as life's common denominators—a heartbeat is a drumline the same way a shout becomes the riff heard around the world.

In 1969, Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" captured the zeitgeist of emotion for millions of Americans. In opposition to the Vietnam War, Hendrix centered the pain of marginalized citizens through distorted whines and screeches in a watershed moment for American consciousness. Half a century later, his display of personal-political echoes throughout a lineage of musicians in revolt.

In 2025, Kendrick Lamar attempted to map his own Woodstock onto the Super Bowl halftime show. His spectacle critiqued empire the way only a commercial artist with allegiances to his wallet would: conceit and hypocrisy. The

night's true critic was New Orleans resident Zül-Qarnajin Nantambu, who faced assault and arrest for running a Sudanese-Palestinian flag across the field, citing Lamar's symbolism as inspiration.

Modeled by Hendrix, Lamar used his music to platform a critique of American hegemony; Nantambu went deeper by transforming abstract into actionable political censure.

Thinkers are doers. Thoughts, therefore, remain our last line of defense.

Recently, I visited London where I saw Cynthia Erivo and Bryan Cranston in *Dracula* and *All My Sons*, respectively. Throughout tours of the British Library, National Portrait Gallery, and Hampton Court Palace, I critiqued history. For the first time in months, I wanted to write.

These days, rent and student loans take precedence over my criticism. So I permit brainrot, victim resigned to soulless screen-scrolling 'cause it's all I can withstand after the brutal eight-hour aerobic exercise I thought my education and résumé would protect me from, where I pour all my energy into the delivery of "Can I get you anything else, boss?," so my tip lands closer to 20% over the measly five I have to call a blessing in today's recessing economy.

As the report finds, I am not alone in this inferno. Most critics are not employed—whether full- or part-time—as critics, and in many cases, not even as writers. Further, one-third of us live in households that have average incomes of \$60,000 or less in America's most expensive cities. This is how they want us, of course: bleeding out on misery and false competition.

To solve the crisis of music criticism, we must treat it as a microcosm of America's crumbling empire.

Waiting tables, I meet a disillusioned American every minute. They reach for their critiques with ease: relaxed truancy laws that normalize "passed

on” students and grade inflation as college becomes the new high school; a gallon of gas as expensive as when Russia invaded Ukraine; environmental responses to fracking and data centers manifesting as chronic illnesses; food stamps cut while the price of eggs climbs ever higher; a cashless economy hell bent on eradicating unhoused individuals; communities under siege. Imagine if each american was equipped with a critical voice and encouraged to share. Imagine if, by standing in our authority as participating citizens, we were able to come together and evaluate the tapestry of late-stage capitalism in its entirety—see how it is wholly woven from the strands of our individual discomforts.

Intentional, studied criticism was the tool placing a piece of art in its correct spot of history’s large, complicated puzzle. As we devalued its function, our foundation crumbled.

So let’s build a new one.

Criticism, at large, divested from the macro-economy, is needed more than ever as a human act of love. It is in our best interest that everyday people are rested and interested enough to watch and listen carefully. Criticism is the backbone of progress; parades of critical voices steered us from strange fruit hanging in trees to lead us to the first Black woman headlining Coachella and revolutionizing its format. While the ailing tyrant and his cronies play God by enforcing natural selection—those who produce at volumes demanded by their techno-fascist regime surviving while flesh-and-blood opponents to the proverbial Matrix face extinction—education needs to move to the heart of our agendas.

This starts with centering children and adolescents, focusing on the restoration of their creative spirit, technical capacities, and, above all, empathy. In young people, we need to develop an instinctual bravery to suggest to a stranger, “Have you thought about it like this?”

Naturally, the family follows. Jazz, as a genre, predicates itself on inheritance—we should treat

critical genius the same. Legacy critics should be obliged to provide training and resources in structured institutions, creating traceable lines of music criticism, as did masters of the Renaissance. We have to invest in the arts as a whole to ensure the sustainability of creative ecosystems that nurture and develop artists, as suggested by the report’s conclusions.

You and I have dealt many a huge blow. We are not yet dead.

Resist the algorithm: treat every album like it’s the only thing you’ll hear for months. Discard urges to grow weary of unchanging soundtracks—listen deeply, front to back. Listen again. Bring in those left in the margins; shoulder responsibility for your neighbor. Put them on to some real good shit. Become ungovernable. Normalize criticism in corporate spaces, normalize its funding as a life-affirming community resource. Equip curious people with the tools they need to change the world. Listen to them before they have nothing left to say except, “I told you so.”

Born and based in the heart of Texas, LaTasha Harris is a cultural critic and fiction writer whose work explores identity formation within systems of power. Their writing has appeared in NPR Music, *Variety*, *Bitch Media*, *Chicago Reader*, *Okayplayer*, *ADJ Magazine*, *Bad Clown Books*, and more. An alumna of Northwestern University and returned Peace Corps volunteer, Harris believes community care, abolition of the prison-industrial complex, and education are essential for progress. They are the force behind *Mercurial Surplus*, a travel newsletter, and *Enlightened Pages Publishing*. When she’s not on deadline, Harris is waiting tables, facilitating writing workshops, patronizing her local libraries, weeping in theaters, and analyzing homoerotic subtext in *Breaking Bad*. Follow her on Instagram and Twitter at @xoxolatesha.

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BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLES: POP MUSIC CRITICS OF COLOR AND THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE

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