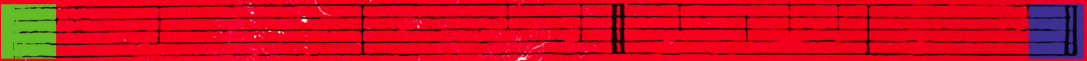


LINER NOTES



A CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK



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Critical Minded

Amongst arts writers and fellow audiophiles, there's a potent temptation to narrate the current state of music criticism as an exceptional crisis. An iteration in an ongoing cycle, acting on that impulse is especially seductive now: Collapsing editorial budgets, shuttered legacy publications, shrinking freelance rates, algorithmic content farms and the encroachment of AI-generated sludge lend themselves to the plain observation that criticism itself has entered a period of decline. In some ways, that climate feels unprecedented. The conditions are brutal; the pace is unsustainable. The infrastructure that once made space for longform, difficult and idiosyncratic music writing has been hollowed out by venture capital, platform logic and an advertising economy that long ago stopped valuing criticism as anything more than auxiliary content. Today's critic is expected to be the writer, brand strategist, videographer, social media manager and community builder all at once, and without commensurate pay for this multipronged role. But if you are a critic of color, none of this is entirely new.



Long before the digital crash, before “pivot to video” and before TikTok became the world’s most powerful A&R machine, Black and brown critics were already learning how to survive

in an industry that treats our labor as useful, but is rarely interested in sustaining or supporting it. In response, many of our greatest critics adapted by refusing the narrow terms of an institutional

job that was largely contingent on classed white patronage. What may feel unprecedented for the industry has often been the baseline for us. Amiri Baraka was never just a critic—he was



a poet, playwright, organizer and theorist who understood music as political text, social history and insurgent practice. Ishmael Reed moved fluidly between criticism, fiction, satire and journalism, making a career out of rejecting singularity altogether. Nelson George built an archive across criticism, filmmaking and historical study, understanding early on that Black cultural production required documentation from within. Joan Morgan transformed criticism into memoir, feminist intervention and theory. They were jacks of all trades, not because they lacked focus, but because both the work and the market surrounding those works demanded range.

That lineage matters, because the project of *Liner Notes* emerges from that context. This journal is not interested in treating the current moment as a singular collapse, nor is it interested in romanticizing some golden age of criticism in spite of deep, persisting inequality. The data from the *Beautiful Struggles: Critics of Color* and the *Pop Music Landscape* establishes that working conditions for critics of color are more fragile now than ever before. But the point is not only to lament what’s been lost: it is to ask what music criticism can become under these late-stage conditions, and what it will require to build something more durable.

The future of criticism will not be secured by nostalgia. It will require new infrastructures, new solidarities and new

ways of valuing the labor of interpretation. It will require us to think seriously about technology without surrendering to its efficiencies and confront the scourge of capitalism on our creative outputs. That means engaging with race and gender as two of the fundamental conditions that shapes who gets heard, who gets paid and who gets remembered. This is the mission of *Critical Minded*—to look past the diagnosis that plagues the arts and towards a more sustainable future.

That question animates every piece in this collection. In *Echoes in Transit*, Lenika Cruz and Ivie Ani offer one of the clearest examples of what criticism as cultural translation looks like now. Their dialogue reminds us that “international pop” is never just music: it is the uneven process of being made visible to Western audiences—on terms that are rarely your own—and the geopolitics baked into that migration. In *El Movimiento*, Tatiana Lee Rodriguez expands that question into reggaeton and dembow, grounding criticism in memory, nightlife, queerness and underground infrastructure. Works from luminaries such as Clover Hope and Andre Gee ask us to contend with criticism’s past, present and future, while Atoosa Moinszadeh and Timmhotep Aku challenge us to examine criticism as a labor practice in solidarity with the masses. In the reverberating panic around criticism’s technological capture, Sidney Madden and Andre Brock offer valuable interventions around

technology’s capacity to erase the value of the written word, and what work remains to preserve it.

Critics are tasked with bridging histories, translating aesthetics and pushing against the shallow frameworks that too often reduce Black and brown music to market trends. That feels especially urgent now, as writing is flattened by metadata and consumable algorithms. Criticism depends on context: AI can summarize, mimic and aggregate, but it cannot remember what it felt like to hear a song in the room it came from. It cannot account for what was happening politically, socially or spiritually when a genre emerged, or understand why a riddim meant survival in one place and escape in another.

To call these conversations *Liner Notes* feels intentional for that reason. *Liner notes* have always existed at the edge of the main event: supplemental, peripheral, easy to overlook. But it’s where the hidden labor is found—credits, samples, influences and acknowledgements that form the continuum of any artistic foundation. What happens when those annotations become the center? Criticism is not disappearing, so much as it is mutating, dispersing, adapting, just as it always has. The true undertaking is whether we can build the conditions for it to survive with integrity—and honor the record—while still making room for what comes next.

THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF COOL



GREG TATE

HOW "COOL
CAPITALISM" HAS
TRANSFORMED
THE MUSIC CRITIC



AMIRI BARAKA

By CLOVER HOPE

Every summer since 2019, I've taught a six-week undergraduate culture writing elective at New York University, helping students translate their opinions into criticism that braids analysis, context, argument, sensory awareness and the confidence to state a clear point of view. Occasionally, a student shows up who seems instinctively attuned to the craft of writing about music. But with music critic gigs in dismal supply, few could comfortably imagine themselves doing it full time. Last summer, for the first time since I started teaching this course, it was canceled due to low enrollment.

Last spring, I had my NYU feature writing class read dream hampton's 1998 Vibe profile, "Jay-Z: The Life." The nine graduate students in the course — mostly women of color in their twenties — appreciated not only hampton's prose but her critique of the Brooklyn rapper's nonchalance. The profile is a masterclass in empathy and accountability, an early portrait of Jay-Z as a complex figure, emotionally detached from the community impacted by his street hustling. Some students were surprised, noting that today's writers couldn't get away with such a candid analysis of a high-profile celebrity. Which outlets would even allow it?

Criticism hasn't disappeared, of course, but the concept of "the critic" has never felt more nebulous. A generation ago, pop music critics built their careers reviewing albums, interviewing musicians and covering local scenes for national magazines and alt-weeklies. Black critics throughout the '80s and the '90s regularly analyzed and contextualized hip-hop stars as they came of age, but the infrastructure that once supported work like hampton's no longer exists. While mainstream outlets like Rolling Stone led broader discussions about pop music, publications like The Source, XXL and Vibe emerged to

bridge the gap, serving as testing grounds where writers could legitimately challenge artists about their art. Decades later, some of those same publications that showcased high-level criticism have become artist-friendly aggregators with diminished resources and authority.

Many of us who still practice traditional music criticism now see it as just one element of a broader writing portfolio. We'll write an album review, moderate a panel or produce sponsored content for artists. But where "the critic" once felt essential to preserving music as an art form, it's clear the role has become more perishable. A once stable, esteemed title has steadily collapsed into a side hustle for many (including myself), with a select few critics working at music-forward publications (Rolling Stone, NPR, *Pitchfork*, The Ringer) or holding staff and contributor positions at legacy outlets (*The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*).

I casually surveyed two of my former NYU students and a mentee, and they shared a similar concern about whether there's still value in calling yourself a music critic these days. One student hesitates to claim the title outright: "The fact that I don't spend most of my time covering music puts me on the fence," he wrote to me. Before graduating, the student applied for fellowships and staff writing positions at magazines and newspapers, hoping to land a job that would allow him to write about music full time, to no avail. "For most people I know, music coverage is something they do outside their 9-5."

The sad truth is that, at present, readers do not read, let alone engage with, legitimate music critiques. Meanwhile, amateur reviews are everywhere, sprawled throughout a vast, decentralized space. Part of the problem is that criticism involves, well, being critical. Inevitably, we find ourselves in a tug-of-war between the artists creating the work and listeners who think their favorite artist deserves more recognition or praise. That tension is historically productive, pushing all sides to evaluate what they value in music — and allowing traditional critics to influence audience taste, place albums in a cultural context, and combat fan bias. After all, many of the best critics developed their voice not through formal journalistic channels

but through obsessive listening, reading and the slow accumulation of knowledge. Those habits are harder to cultivate, however, in a system where the economic incentives point elsewhere. What does it mean to now call yourself a critic if the ecosystem has radically shifted?

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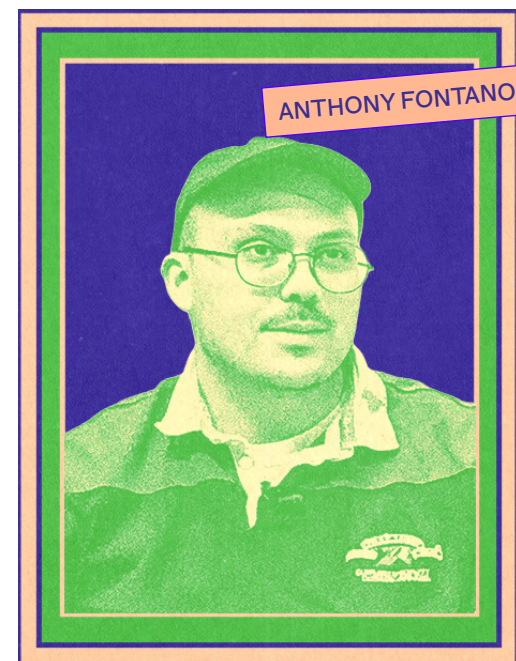
I came up in the mid-2000s during the blog era, when digital media began to drastically increase in popularity but print was still king. I worked alongside editors and writers who treated criticism as a serious craft, and wrote plenty of clumsy reviews before I learned how to write competent ones. The experience forced me to take the work of criticism seriously, and I learned how to articulate an argument about music rather than simply react to it, eventually writing for *The Village Voice*. Even when I wasn't writing straight-up album reviews, I was doing the work of a critic because the publications and editors I wrote for made space for honest critiques about music, regardless of the article format.

Sharing my taste felt intimidating, but it showed me how vital critics are to synthesizing the world around us. Unfortunately, publications that served as training grounds in the '90s and aughts have either shut down (*The Village Voice*, MTV News) or undergone significant changes.

The old system provided aspiring critics a place to develop their voice, learn from mistakes, and be guided by experienced editors; now, those opportunities are limited. Universities and arts programs that nurtured criticism are facing their own financial setbacks as schools prioritize fields deemed more sustainable. A crucial part of learning criticism is reading and deconstructing older reviews for knowledge and context, and subscription-based models undermine that process and turn access into a privilege.

Writers now work in a landscape where independent creators and publications alike fret endlessly about advertisers, fan armies and access: critics in 2026 must now meet the demands of a media world that prioritizes marketable on-camera personalities. Conversations that used to mainly appear in mainstream print now happen on podcasts, YouTube videos, Substack newsletters, and as fragmented micro-analyses on social media threads. In turn, anyone interested in writing about music for pay, including seasoned journalists, is expected to move across multiple media formats — but the pay-to-play model introduces new complications.

As much as it pains many of us to admit, while these digital creators often lack the methodology and ethics needed to be deemed true



"critics"—they tend to thrive in the same environment where written criticism is increasingly disregarded. Perhaps the most popular and polarizing of them all, Anthony Fantano, transformed his public radio show *The Needle Drop* into a YouTube channel that's gained over 3 million subscribers since 2009. (For context, NYT's *Popcast*, an audio and video podcast hosted by the paper's veteran writers Jon Caramanica and Joe Coscarelli, has roughly 108,000 YouTube subscribers.) Rolling Stone named Fantano one of 2024's most influential creators. That same year, Spin profiled him, arguing that "there is a strong case for him as modern music's most successful individual critic, with a reputation tied to no entity but his own." That type of viewership suggests that fans and audiences want some form of discussion and engagement around music.

Many critics have adapted, and a small number have successfully built independent audiences. The aforementioned *Popcast* examines pop music releases and industry trends. Others like *Pop Pantheon* and *60 Songs That Explain the '90s* revisit older music while discussing contemporary artists. YouTube and TikTok have welcomed a new wave of independent commentators who deconstruct songs and albums in short-form videos and interview artists. Their reach often surpasses that of traditional publications, but the cultural authority once held by critics has dwindled, along with the media institutions that supported them.

The democratization of criticism, while helping to reduce widespread elitism, has created new tensions. In theory, anyone can now claim to be a critic, sure. Social media has lowered the barriers that once

kept professional writers separate from fans. On the one hand, this openness has made music discussions less exclusive and

less intimidating, removing the long-held stigma of the critic as the grizzled malcontent opining from their lofty perch. But the apparent mainstreaming of expertise has lessened the role critics once played in shaping public discourse. This shift naturally changes how younger writers view and adopt the "critic" label—a fear affirmed and echoed by music writers who've been forced to abandon the kind of criticism they want to pursue because of editorial restrictions, widespread layoffs, industry politics and a dearth of paid gigs for which criticism is valued and well compensated. "Critic" often sounds too narrow and, in some cases, too negative. For others, the title feels unearned or too sacred to claim.

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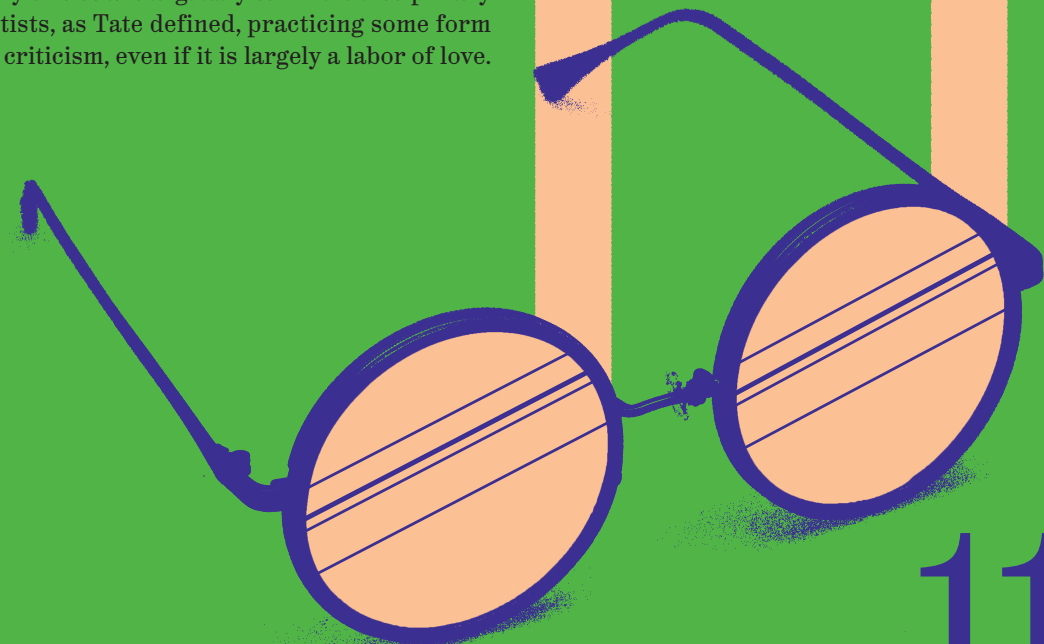
For this generation's aspiring critics, there's no real standardized pipeline—and not much of an informal one, either. But the idea of the Renaissance critic isn't entirely new. Black critics have always had to carve out space in an industry dominated by white men. In their case, "music critic" was an expansive label, not limited to solely writing about music. Black critics of the past were versatile journalists and thinkers covering the arts, community and politics, often working as documentarians and artists themselves, treating their work as extensions of their daily lives and identities. The late Greg Tate not only critiqued rap and rock but also composed original music with his collective, The Black Rock Coalition. Nelson George authored screenplays and liner notes. Black criticism was a collective effort, affording writers both cultural and tangible currency—they could make a living doing it. "Critic," in that social climate, became a badge of honor in an exclusionary media landscape.

Tate discussed this on a NYT panel titled *The Vitality of Black Critics*, recalling how Amiri Baraka's writings shaped his own understanding of music criticism: "[T]he opportunity to talk about the music is of course the opportunity to bring our whole lives to who we are,"

Tate explained, "and it's also the reason that most of us who were writing in the '80s and [the] '90s really became, or were, multidisciplinary artists. We never thought that criticism was the be all and end all of what we had to offer."

Indeed, many of our luminaries wore a thousand hats. Today's critics—many of whom came up in stable digital media environments—may have stumbled into an echo of this reality in the media's new gig economy. The critic-as-creator paradigm, in turn, reaffirms the eternal romantic bond between art and criticism. So is the music critic truly dead, or simply experiencing a crisis of ingenuity? The truth likely exists somewhere between a fatalist view and the exceptionalist Renaissance model.

Despite the bleak prospects, none of this means criticism is obsolete. Criticism is ultimately a product of sustained curiosity and care; music criticism persists because it offers the type of context and friction that fandom alone cannot. It complicates the neat narratives that dominate social media, distinguishing itself from "conversations about music," which can and do happen anywhere. Written criticism is, in fact, a specialized skill that not everyone can do, though they can learn. While the job will likely continue to become more niche under the new media structure, contemporary critics are arguably still multidisciplinary artists, as Tate defined, practicing some form of criticism, even if it is largely a labor of love.



THE ————— AFTERLIVES ————— OF



KAY

By ANTOINE HARDY

P L A Y E R

At the age of 45, I am trying to come to terms with not being cool anymore. But being a hip-hop fan complicates things – the genre has always been focused on youth and their approval of what's cool.

In recent years, my students at New York University, Seton Hall, and Borough of Manhattan Community College often tell me about the excitement of discussing new albums on Twitch, in group chats and in private Discords. Namely, they express the relief they feel outside of public forums: hip-hop fandoms have shifted towards private forums online, which has benefits, but also downsides. You can forge tighter bonds, but groupthink and homogeneity in taste pose the risk of creating echo chambers.

A recent Pigeons and Planes article argued that online fandom misses OG tastemakers, who don't just chastise – they educate. Instead they get figures like DJ Akademiks, whose penchant for spectacle drowns out sincere discussions of hip-hop bonafides – in fact, he was once shocked to find out that Jay-Z was a ghostwriter. Today's climate makes it hard to discern fingerwagging from sincere “let me put you on” – but back in the day, informed heads would check you for your bad taste, then educate you. If you thought Prince was just singles, @soulfunk or a @DJW, a head would put you on to Linn drum Prince. If you thought D'Angelo was just Prince-informed, users like mistamonotone and Dr Claw, would correct you and point to the Sly Stone and J Dilla influences before there were books written on it.

I recognize, however, for Gen Z and generations before them, the Internet is where hip-hop has always lived. My students are just trying to carve out their space in hip-hop fandom, and I relate to their desire to create their own online spaces. Pre-1999, hip-hop lived in the imagined “streets,” but that all changed, thanks to early

adopters of online hip-hop. About 27 years ago, my fellow old heads and I helped establish one of hip-hop's first online residencies: a left of center hip-hop hub that “started it all,” known as OkayPlayer.

SNARK AND SHARING

Decades before social media and the phrase “online music community” was studied in academia, OkayPlayer was one of the first outposts* where hip-hop fans from all over the world could commiserate, debate, build bonds, share music they liked and made and interact with their favorite artists. OkayPlayer transformed from a standard fan site for The Roots into a tastemaking hub and Black digital homeplace—a forebearer of Tumblr, Black Soundcloud and Reddit. Co-founder Angela Nissel's rendition of interactive message boards, where Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson would communicate with early Roots fans, changed hip-hop fandom as we know it.

In this space, for the first time, the hip-hop fan was no longer this invisible imagined audience or the occasional call-in radio critic. The Internet gave the fan a voice, and while that has metastasized into Stan armies and parasocial psychosis, us early adopters were unknowingly digital pioneers who had broken the barrier between artist

and audience. We were unknowingly creating a grammar of online music fandom—the fan was empowered to not just adore or fawn over faves, but to critique, interrogate and challenge them.

Today, on social media platforms such as X,

you can see people disparage the “armchair A&Rs:” fans who give unsolicited advice, acting as if they work in the industry. If you check my X bio, you will see “armchair A&R.” It's an inside joke at OKP, but also a holdover: We embraced this persona, letting artists know what we really wanted, and recognized our agency. As former moderator Desus Nice fondly noted in August 2024, we had artists like Jill Scott and Talib Kweli mad enough to address OKP's “armchair A&Rs” in song. Old heads like myself can have rap fan amnesia, claiming that the current disinhibition in rap fans online is a sign of their dysfunctionality, when in actuality, it was passed down from this first wave of online fans.

Often, underneath the vitriol, lived solid constructive feedback that artists appreciated. Moderator fire100 would tell me many artists “from Prince on down” would lurk with obscure names to get that same blunt and brutal—but honest—feedback, in the same way artists search their name on twitter today. As OKP founding member Shawn Gee told Complex in 2013, “we opened the door of direct communication to the fans, and artists learned a lot. Before that, there was always a third party between the fans and the artist. Sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad.” Indeed, I co-sign user mistak5's sentiment, shared in 2019: “The snark was part of what made [OKP] so great but we definitely took it too far many times.”

Indeed, OKP was a primordial space for music snark and clapbacks that lives on today in hip-hop social media and Black digital culture. We often went too far, but we were figuring out our identity and voice just like youth today are. While there were Internet trolls, most people didn't critique music for clout, because fandom couldn't generate sponsorship deals or anything tangible besides props back then. They were just sharing genuine opinions and the beliefs, in a democratic space “where anyone could get it,”

and criticism “could be a clapback” while also being support and acknowledgment of your talent.

I think it's important to remember that OKP was a hub for fans of non-mainstream hip-hop. As the site was launching its first tour in 2000, Nissel told Washington Post: “To be young and urban, now you're supposed to only like the music they play on radio. If you don't it can be very lonely. Here everybody's accepted. You're an OkayPlayer, its cool.” Just like fans today, when giving this access to artists and the industry, the first wave of users didn't hold back—they were as passionate about what they loved as what they hated, and they finally had their voices acknowledged by peers and artists.

Underneath the snark was often sincerity and support: We wanted you to do better, we wanted the best music, we wanted to see each other win*. And that's what was on my mind when I thought of the afterlife of OKP. The site has evolved into a media outlet and notable brand. But looking back, as old people like me do, while I see traces of OKP's snark everywhere, I often feel the community aspect of the platform that helps contextualize that snark is missing. Sharing knowledge and taste—and supporting each other—is what really made the site special, and it's also something I worry my students don't have access to in today's climate.

OKP was a social network predicated on what fandom expert Nancy Baym denotes as “the five hallmarks of social music communities:”

1. a sense of space
2. shared practice
3. shared resources and support
4. shared identities
5. interpersonal relationships

JILL SCOTT



These five attributes are what made OKP feel like a home—not just a public forum, but a

productive dwelling space for identity and taste. And for Black folk in particular, this digital hush harbor allowed us to freely express ourselves, share our identities and commiserate with others—without any interference from outside sources—before a digital identity could be attached to you. OKP embodied what we call in social network studies “*structural equivalence*,” where there’s no hierarchy, and no demarcated preference. Any type of fan could be heard.

Nissel, the creator of the message boards, told me once that as young Black people, “we built this community because we needed it!” A clapback wasn’t about clout yet, it was about sharing your opinion and demonstrating the space as democratic. People were able to be brutally honest because it felt most like a community, not a public forum.

As DJ, artist and podcaster Donwill argued, “The Roots found fans, but we found each other, and having the space to be honest and seeing other people have honest conversations inspired you to feel you could be real.” When I think of OKP, I think of “sharing over the snark.” It was the ethic of the early Internet and OKP, and endures with fellow OkayPlayers today. You also could discuss your college life, grad school anxieties and your breakups—Shawn Gee and other founders began to realize that users “connected on the message board, not even about music, not even about art, but about life.” Sharing was the ethic that undergirded the boards. This is why I don’t fully embrace the argument that “OKP was the original Black twitter”—because it was more than that. It was a social network functioning as a homeplace.

In 2024, Columnist Mikki Hiddelstein summed up what this online space of OKP became in its heyday:

- (1) **A digital space to discover new music (sense of space)**
- (2) **a place to post your own opinions and perspectives about music (shared practice)**
- (3) **an after-school program where you could learn to supercharge your taste levels from OG tastemakers and gatekeepers (shared support and resources)**
- (4) **a place where anyone could talk shit and crack jokes with the first chances of “going viral” (interpersonal relationships)**
- (5) **a place where fans could participate in launching an artist’s career [...] and even a place where artists could connect for collaborations that formed actual successful groups (support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships)**

OKP was a talent, taste and creativity incubator that ran on the support of fellow fans. It’s important to note that #thatsite and the sense of community were built on Black comedy. Boondocks comics were on the front page for years. Through jokes and signifying we built common ground, goodwill and rapport that made people comfortable to both share music later and to discuss and debate it with deep honesty. Or to get academic, sharing specific experiential experiences through Black signifying “generated tight bonds of participants in online communities,” as my homie Andre Brock has detailed in his work. The rhetorical innovation of Black signifying through memes and jokes has long been a building block for microcommunities and was featured on OKP’s early days, long before it was on Twitter.

In music fandom studies, there’s much discussion about relational labor, *which is often how users make fan pages, merch and beyond for clout and to garner attention from the artists. To be fair, we had a solid dose of that on OKP.

However, the real relational labor was stuff we made for ourselves. OkayPlayers community relational labor was activated in meeting up with each other at concerts and later for the OkayPlayer reunion, the OkayPlayer tour, and Roots Picnic. Fans were making OKP TV and filming vlogs for artists that we championed on the site like JDavey or Janelle Monae. They were shooting rare performances of The Roots and Jimmy Fallon in 2009. Fans even made the okaymentuary, a documentary on the history of the OKP message boards. Similar to Discord servers my students frequent, we created OKP Music Club to share

music directly and talk offline. Users Deephunk and DJ Tara took their love for J. Dilla in a Bed-Stuy bedroom and made Donuts Forever, in its 20th installment, as a global event celebrating the life of Dilla, a patron saint of the site.* We supported your jokes and your first drafts and celebrated people’s graduations, baby announcements and eventual music careers.

What was unique about OKP was the diversity of music nerds who expanded your taste in music. It made me a better fan, and later, a decent professor. Taste is a means of experiencing the world. The word is “sensory,” but even in its primordial origin, the word confers critical evaluation. Derived from the Middle English verb “tasten”—which means to touch, taste, or test—and in this space, we could test out some of everything.

In 2014 his book on music taste, *Let’s Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*, Carl Wilson explains how taste and access are inextricably intertwined: if “good” taste is an elevated ideal (especially one reached dialectically), then very few people can have it, because good taste would have to be practiced and developed.

OKP’s user base was diverse in age, region and taste, which allowed for the ability to practice and develop a wide ranging taste. We joke about social media’s age range today, but OKP had teenagers like me, 30-somethings like Questlove, fresh out of college folk like Nissel and even older music heads of all genres communing in the same space. This diversity allowed for taste expansion: Users like @fire would post BB King and Lou Reed memorial posts with a treasure trove of music and context, while The Lesson would not only help popularize the term “yacht rock” and established tastemakers would correct you on its right usage and break it down if you were confused.



D'ANGELO

For example:

- > yacht-rock is used to symbolize the type of coked-out, slick>west-coast rock of the late 70's where smooth fusion jazz,>R&B/soul, the softest aspect of FM/arena-rock, slight elements
- > of country/roots-rock and expensive LA studio musicians with
- > "jazz-chops" (think the guys in Toto or the types of dudes
- > you'll find on a Steely Dan record) kind of bled together. If it sounds like 1979-80 Doo-bie Brothers, it's yacht rock."

Music communities that embrace diversity in taste and perspectives have stronger and longer-lasting bonds: the echo chamber never appears because new voices and perspectives are encouraged. My degree may be in communication, but I was trained in musicology by OKP. The site functioned as a talent incubator, where a national pool of music nerds helped you refine and elevate your game and ultimately led to new waves of hip-hop music that endure to this day, like Little Brother.

In 2003, a Questlove co-sign did not have the instant Midas touch effect that it does now. It was the fans on OKP who functioned as an online street team, spreading the word of mouth about groups like Little Brother from the boards to the industry. Little Brother were not the first rappers embracing the digital age—they were one of the first hip-hop group whose fans "lived online." "I remember those early days of making records and putting them online and it was like, 'Yo, if this ain't right, we're gonna hear about it. The Player gon' tell us,'" Phonte said in an interview.

"The message boards didn't care about nothing. If your shit was wack, motherfuckers would let you know immediately." Phonte and Little Brother had a built in focus group with boards but also this ethos of keeping it honest — and many did, especially their disdain for 9th Wonder's drums.

Before stan armies and clipping teams, we were Little Brother missionaries spreading the gospel about online friends becoming underground hip-hop icons. We were sharing grainy tour videos, buying merch and posting magazine interview scans. As writer Kyesha Jennings explained in 2023, the boards were crucial for Little Brother, "who found camaraderie — and feedback for early tracks and The Listening (whether they wanted it or not) — and built a fanbase for themselves thanks to their participation on OkayPlayer".

For older millennials, they were the bridge from the '90s to the early aughts, as they framed themselves as the Little Brothers of hip-hop's that decade's golden age, retaining the lessons but pushing the culture forward. They rapped about

the things we talked about on the boards: dating, jobs and wanting to do something creative. "Speed" was literally a song about life passing you by working at a call center — we were family. Nothing was ever the same in hip-hop: the active involvement of OKP allowed the music to expand beyond the boards, "foreshadowing how the Internet could and would play a crucial part in an artist's rise in the digital age," as Jennings put it.

As a North Carolina native, I was just 45 minutes away from Little Brother and their Justus League crew and knew firsthand that there was no street buzz for the group back then, outside of their support at the beloved and tiny Cat's Cradle venue. In a few years out from posting on the boards, audiences of all types were finding them. Industry faves like Pete Rock and De La Soul were up on Little Brother, and they got signed to an indie and later a major label. They were featured in XXL and The Source. They were doing Redbull Lectures. 9th Wonder

was producing for Jigga and Beyonce. Three dudes from the boards could change how you got seen and signed — we really predicted the future.

I watched a southern rap sound from my home state, that wasn't bounce or trap, not only carve out a space in hip-hop, but signal the power of online audiences. Phonte and Big Pooh disrupted the paradigm: You didn't need a label, access to a big studio, or to be from a hip-hop heavy region. There's no MySpace Kid Cudi or blog era, no interrogation of your amount of followers by lazy A&R's, no artists from unheralded regions like Mississippi and Tennessee (outside of Memphis) until OKP showed the power of the online hip-hop fan.

This curative power from OKP ultimately trickled into all corners of digital culture, from politics, to sports, to podcast comedy. And it really is like a fraternity or an alma mater, who saw people grow and flourish in their creative pursuits and continued to support and spread the word about them. On the Questlove Supreme podcast, Desus explained how the site was a proving ground for their comedic attitude, style and their first followers. Nissel was in a screenwriters club with people like me and @ikemoses, and would later write for Scrubs and Boondocks. @jazzbeezy aka Joseph Patel would talk music on the boards and share some of his early journalistic work advocating Roots-adjacent artists. Years later, we celebrated on Twitter when he and Quest won an Oscar for Summer of Soul, with art direction from fellow OKP alumni @fwmj.

Unfortunately, the industry had no idea what to do with an online audience in 2005. Phonte once spoke on the conundrum of OKP's pioneer status: "The problem that we had was that we had an audience that the label couldn't really see," he pointed out. "This



was even before social media so they couldn't even see followers and likes on

a post. There was no way to quantify the audience that we had. We were the ones that went through and we took those hits so that the Coles, the Kendricks, the Drakes could have that. Someone had to be that bridge from A Tribe Called Quest to Kendrick.”

The proof is in the pudding: a generation of OKP fans infiltrated Twitter, praising their faves from the boards, and ultimately helped establish hip-hop's velvet underground for the next generation, from Drake's cultural domination to the rise of follow-up North Carolina artists like J Cole and Mavi.

It's not the only bridge, though. Along with Little Brother, early Oddisee, Kev Brown and Phonte's Grammy Award-winning Foreign Exchange collaboration, you could see launches on OKP. Foreign Exchange's debut is as much of a precursor to Drake's moody ambient sound on *So Far Gone* as his Phonte cadences: The first Drake song I heard was on #thatsite “featuring Little Brother. I remember Kendrick opening for Little Brother via an OkayPlayer post right before Section.80 In the same way my students feel connected to blog era rappers they discovered early and watch “blow up,” we felt connected to Little Brother's success and failures—the breakups and the reconciliations—and the boards were there to support them through it all.

Our labor lives on in the digital cultural memory of hip-hop. I would never guess that my students would know more about Little Brother than, say, the enthralling grit of Mobb Deep or even The Cool Kids. But when I peruse through the archives, I notice all the recent writings about Little Brother's recent reunion, block party, documentary and farewell

tour are all writings by people who were literal kids when their debut dropped. The young California rapper/singer Zayallcaps, who's 27 years old, recently posted that his father was a former OKP member and put him on to Little Brother. In a recent conversation, Zay waxed poetic about their influence, “[Little Brother] made you feel like you was in the dorms kickin' it ... as an adult I appreciated how relatable and regular they were, like these are regular dudes with incredible rap skills ... they're the epitome of hip-hop to me. I absolutely try to embody that shit in my music.” In similar reverence, Brooklyn-based singer rapper Kelly Moonstone, 31, explains that Little Brother and Phonte especially had a seismic impact on her. “I really think that without Phonte, and the impact of him and Little Brother as a unit on my personal life and soundscape of my life, and what their music means to me, I wouldn't exist exactly the same as i am now ... they are not afraid to be vulnerable in their music, not afraid to be funny in the music, and Phonte is somebody who's not afraid to just display the entire range of emotion.” I can only beam with pride at the knowledge that both OKP and North Carolina love has actually been passed down to the new generation of rap fans and artists.

My “niece” Jade once wrote, “If Wu-Tang is for the kids, Little Brother is for the ones that raise them”—which makes OKP's fanbase the uncs and aunties who informed your fandom. One of the funniest corners of OKP, The Lesson, was moderated by artists E L U C I D, Rob Cave, Von Pea and Donwill, who eventually formed a rap collective named after the forum itself:

Lessonary. They became fixtures of New York's independent hip-hop renaissance in the late 2000s and early blog

era, embodying the same wit, irreverence and community-minded ethos that made OKP feel like more than a website.

Years later, I found myself on the other side of that lineage, as my NYU students kept insisting I listen to E L U C I D himself—it took me a minute to realize they were talking about the same rapper whose posts I'd spent years reading online. Today, as one half of Armand Hammer and a cornerstone of Backwoodz Studioz, his work carries forward something unmistakably OKP: the sly humor, the productive snark, the direct dialogue with fans and an insistence on building an alternative cultural infrastructure outside the industry's center of gravity.

OKP's legacy lives on in many ways. I see Nai-ma's yearly Music Sermon (circa 2017) and I am reminded of the communal energy of the site as fans and celebrities join in on their love of music and help audiences expand their taste and relive their memories. The indie darling writer and fan community of blogs like no bells in many ways were heirs to OkayPlayer, who they cited as a major influence. The NYC-based collective expanded beyond a magazine and started hosting live events, readings, pop-ups and Discord channels to share new indie and alternative hip-hop on. Founder Mano Sundaresan argued that the decline of Twitter as a place for good faith fandom was part of the inspiration; he has since become the Editor-in-Chief of a little place called *Pitchfork*.

You can see the lingering OKP ethos in That Good Shit, a creative hub co-run by my former NYU student Quincy. A DJ/MC/Producer who endured my “make your own space” speech way too many times for his own good, he has since started holding shows at after hour barbershops. TGS has created an online space, launched live events and pop ups and cultivated community support based around shared taste in “the good shit” of music. I

am biased, but i hope it flourishes, as I think that when an online community becomes a real community, everyone wins.

A few Saturdays ago, I went to my old job at BRIC in Downtown Brooklyn and witnessed something that felt like “the message boards coming to life.” A cosmopolitan audience was all gathered for Dilla, at the 20th Donuts Are Forever event. I walked into the venue and dapped up @ deepfunk and some OKP veterans; I listened to the sounds of DJ Tara playing one of her classic house/techno mixes. I bobbed my head as I saw a slide show of past Donuts visitors, which easily doubled as a slide show of many members of the OKP fam. I saw Phonte, my neighbor DonWill, people who helped me get jobs, people I dated and people who have supported me since I was in my 20s.

Time has a way of turning loops into songs: Looking around the room, I realized that all those years on OKP had functioned like a sample, a fragment that felt small in isolation but became transformative once it worked its way into the melody. As the Dilla was cranked up and Questlove took over on the boards (music not digital this time), I looked over to see Joseph Patel and felt transported to my campus computer room for a split second. The message boards, the inside jokes, the mixtape threads, the heated debates over albums—none of it disappeared. It was chopped, replayed and stretched across decades until it became friendships, careers, marriages, collaborations, memorials, and eventually—as DJ Tara took the mic to remind us—a fundraiser for the community.

As I gazed upon the bevy of faces I had first encountered as usernames, I realized with joy that the forum my community lamented had simply been pressed into a different format. The platforms have changed, but their central ethos has lived on—artists and listeners creating a space for one another, on their own terms.

TALIB KWELI



ECHOES

WHO
GETS
HEARD

IN

WHEN THE
WORLD
GOES POP



TRANSIT

23
ONE

of the trickiest tasks as a critic writing about international pop is translation—and not just in the literal, linguistic sense. Mainstream music is so full of walls between labels, artists, commentators and fandoms, that cultural discussions seeking genuine connection and understanding feel impossible to come by. The strongest criticism works generously to explain across borders and tastes, divining meaning in the music and translating specific cultural references into general legibility. In this wide-ranging conversation, Ivie Ani and Lenika Cruz attempt to do precisely that—delving into their experiences covering Afrobeats and K-pop, respectively, and attempting to recover the nuances often erased by social media, geopolitics and cultural hegemony.

THIS CONVERSATION HAS BEEN EDITED AND CONDENSED FOR CLARITY.

A Conversation With
IVIE ANI & LENIKA CRUZ

Tell me about how you decided to commit to covering K-pop.

LENIKA CRUZ

Before I started listening to K-pop, I was a culture editor. I had written about music before: I was on the arts and entertainment team, and that was my first taste of writing about music for a general audience. The weekend I covered Saturday Night Live (SNL), BTS had a musical appearance, and that was my entry point into learning a bit more about this particular genre/industry, and I started commenting on the ways that K-pop, as a phenomenon, has entered the mainstream discourse in America. I was on the outside of something that was really big and I wanted to understand better.

IA: From your perspective, you looked at yourself as an outsider, but everybody reading your work and probably looking at you now does not view you as an outsider, or maybe didn't even view you as an outsider when you got into covering it. Do you think that it is imperative or required for that person who's covering these types of genres to be of that identity?

LC: It's so multifaceted and multilayered. There's questions on the part of who the audience is, who the editors assigning these pieces are, and then there's the identity/background or familiarity of the writer who is covering this topic. There is a danger of

having someone parachute in, as it's so often said. I wasn't really intending to become some kind of BTS expert – I don't even identify as a K-pop expert.

There are different levels of privilege and pigeonholing that often happen in cultural criticism. In my case, there was a very specific kind of privilege that came with me being able to pitch this kind of story – largely institutional in this case. I'm not Korean; I don't speak Korean. Despite that, I think people feel comfortable having me as part of conversations because I am a Pacific Islander of Asian descent. But I was interested in what was compelling people of very different backgrounds and identities

to be drawn to this kind of music and this fandom, and I wasn't attempting to conceal my previous lack of knowledge.

My story of how I started covering K-pop is probably so different from your own entry into covering Afrobeats.

IA: It was more personal for me because I am Nigerian, but I grew up in New York. There started to be this gravitational pull happening where the music was taking off, but the artists were not yet in the position they're in now where they're mainstream and every publication is covering them. I was someone who fit the bill identity wise – being Nigerian, being young, being of the culture, understanding hip-hop, being from a market as big as New York City and then understanding how to translate things to each audience. They needed someone who could be a point person for mainstream media in the United States who actually got it. The basis of my career, as it pertains to Afrobeats, has really just been me being a part of the community. It was the perfect storm, and I got pushed into the space of being the premier voice of Afrobeats on the mainstream American side.

LC: I feel personally like I was late to K-pop, and yet from the perspective of so much of the rest of the world, it was kind of right at the moment before BTS got even bigger. I noticed it became a lot easier to pitch stories and to have my editors come to me and say, "Hey, I saw this thing about BTS, do you want to cover it?" As opposed to me having to say "Hey, I think this is important." The case became easier and easier to make because other publications were covering them.

What is lost in cultural translation when these genres get packaged for Western consumption, and who is responsible for protecting what gets lost? I'm curious how this applies to you specifically as a writer – what kinds of questions do you navigate

for yourself and what things do you try to balance?

IA: I don't know if I can say there's a language barrier when it comes to Afrobeats because most of the artists are speaking English, but the Western world might still not be able to understand that. It is pidgin English, or English used with native languages, so some of the music gets lost in translation. But as cliché as that sounds, music is the most universal language.

I do think that there is a real big responsibility for writers, journalists and media figures to be able to translate what artists are doing – not just to translate the music, but translate the cultural, societal and historical context that goes into how this music even came out. Let's look at the political landscape of Nigeria in the '90s and late '80s that led to Afrobeats even becoming a genre: If we think about a country coming out of coups and dictatorships and going into democracy – this idea of needing a music genre that could double as escapism or aspirational cultural cues for a younger generation is something that I think gets lost in translation in the Western media landscape. That's because people are still stuck on this idea of figuring out what Afrobeats is and who each artist is.

The main media narrative I still see when it comes to Afrobeats artists is "Here's how so-and-so is bringing Nigeria to the world, bringing Africa to the world. It's just such a surface level approach to the storytelling, and what gets lost in translation is what makes the music interesting. At this point in 2026, it's not that new anymore, yet that's all the coverage that we got.

LC: I feel similarly about the frustrations. In some ways the headlines were writing themselves – "BTS is the first Korean artist to ____," "the first Asian artist to ____" – and that

was enough of a reason to cover them. They made history, so that's what we're going to write about. But what else? There were times where I would push back and insist that a particular fan's translation was included or that I wanted to keep some lyrical analysis. What's the point if not the music?

IA: There really are a lot of similarities in the idea that each artist within the genre doesn't seem to be getting interrogated about their artistry, or paid attention to about their artistry. It almost feels like they're just this shiny tool that's new and nice to look at, but nobody really knows how to use it or what to use it for.

There's this push and pull between culture and the artists wanting to integrate themselves into the Western music world and separate themselves from the Nigerian music industry — the African music industries, plural. It's bleak, but where are these artists making their money? It's not on the continent. It's in Europe and America because they tour here more than they tour at home. So a sort of distancing happens when artists reach a certain point in their career where they have gotten this mainstream Western attention.

They're not viewing the music as something worth experimenting with or taking back home and re-integrating into the audience. I know the Nigerian market would love to experience tours the way we get tours here. People are just not seeing the bigger picture.

LC: That's a really chilling but accurate way of putting it: the extraction of cultural coverage as a resource until you can't get anything new out of it anymore.

How big of a role does consumerism play in Afrobeats' music production? In K-pop it feels like there's an outsized influence — the whole industry is designed around volume and keeping things new, sometimes at the expense of the artist's well-being or fans' wallets.

IA: When I think about the types of albums that they make, if we look at the top artists, they're not cranking out an album per year the way pop stars in America or do; in part, I suspect, because of production costs and infrastructural differences in Nigeria and in Ghana.

Afrobeats artists get a lot of flack for not having “substance” — music that speaks to the times and holds the system accountable. But if you look at the political history or the cultural history of where Nigeria is coming from, people needed a break, and that's why Afrobeats happened. People needed a break from dictatorships, from hardship. There is an element of aspirational escapism and wanting to incorporate fun into a country that is very difficult to thrive in for a lot of local citizens who are not wealthy, musicians or in the entertainment industry. So yes, I think Nigerians deserve a little treat and that's Afrobeats.

LC: What you were just saying now reminded me of the question about what gets lost in cultural translation. A lot of times in K-Pop you see groups who have a bigger fandom overseas than they do in their home country. For Korean artists, there is a failure to see the industry in the context of Korea's massive rapid modernization after World War II, the partition and the way that South Korea being so shaped by American culture, money and military ultimately plays into a more cutthroat music industry.

One thing that draws a lot of people into K-pop, for example, is this emphasis on artists being highly “trained” dancers, singers and performers before they even debut. There is an understanding that fans can listen to any number of other artists, and a sense of responsibility that a lot of these groups feel toward their fans to not put on half-assed performances. I think that competitiveness comes from historic scarcity in part and from a desire to be part of a potentially very profitable industry — it's a form of escapism through excellence in a way. The way that that often gets framed, though, is “Look at this strange industry, how dark it is compared to

how we do things in America, where we don't treat our artists this way.” It becomes a bit of a spectacular and stereotypical framing that I don't think is entirely unfair, but is treated as though K-pop is uniquely bad because of some of these working conditions. There's a nuanced conversation to be had about what audience is being centered. I think this is the challenge faced by any kind of art that wants to become globally popular — you want to be taken on your own terms, but you're also trying to meet audiences where they're at and be sensitive to that.

IA: This would be a good place to talk about fandoms. Are K-pop and Afrobeats fandoms similar in intensity? I feel like the K-pop fans are on a different level.

LC: Yes, they're very different.

IA: Fans will definitely show you how they feel about your work, regardless if they read it or watch it. Luckily, I don't think I've been met with Afrobeats backlash yet by any fandom, even though these fan bases are very intense.

Afrobeats is anchored by this idea of there being a big three in the way that hip-hop is anchored by a top five. I would say that the most intense and engaged fanbases are definitely Davido, Wizkid, and Burna Boy's — but now there are newer artists like Rema, Ayra, Omah Lay and Tems. Rema recently sparked a conversation about the need to call it a big four now, because he has made tremendous strides as far as Afrobeats is concerned. But across genres, we're in a very volatile Internet era of standom and fandom.

LC: I think it's right to situate the intensity of these fandoms within the larger kind of intensity of fandoms as a whole in the social media era; I would say the same is true for K-pop. The really intense, kind of toxic-leaning discourse tends to happen online, especially with subfandoms.

Sometimes an outlet would publish something and only include quotes from

like three of the seven members, or would forget to include a picture of one of the members, and fans would get *angry*. I would have to be mindful of not accidentally excluding one of the members from coverage when writing, especially when I was active on Twitter. I had 80,000 followers at one point which was all due to BTS, and that created an impression that I'm some kind of spokesperson for the fandom, which was not the case. I'm just another fan, and I just happen to have an outlet where I can write about some of these things. I would get fans piling on me on social media because I said something negative about a new BTS collaboration on a song — people would be like, “You're so prominent that if an outlet were to see what you said, they're gonna publish it and that's gonna bring more negative attention to BTS.” It felt so ridiculous to me, but I think that speaks to the way that critical attention is seen and how social media discourse around an artist is so heavily policed.

IA: Mm-hmm.

LC: If you want an artist to be capable of making music that is open to being liked or disliked, then you have to start by saying that it's okay for someone to dislike this. BTS is not gonna be hurt by some tweet that I post. They're bigger than any one article or writer or any publication, and that's a great thing. But I think it speaks to an insecurity that still remains among a lot of fans that despite how big they are, that they're still the biggest underdogs in the music industry and still vulnerable in some way. I think that's just something that we as fans, or that fans in general, have to just get over and become okay with and have more grace about.

IA: Do you think that there is any generative side to this intense standom in K-pop? I can kind of see the silver lining with Afrobeats standoms and fandoms. *Kind of.*

Because Afrobeats does not have that same type of a legacy media machine that the United States has or that music in the

United States has, the fandoms and stans fill that gap as decentralized marketing engines. They're essentially these micro-agencies where they're doing a lot of grunt work: editing clips, cutting up trailers, building out narratives — media narratives — breaking news, and posting organic videos and photos, posting firsthand accounts. They're breaking news that a lot of publications and writers use to corroborate stuff or pick up and run as news. So the stan Twitter and Instagram part of the Afrobeats engine is integral to that news cycle over there — it's essentially free marketing, free PR, free work that labels would pay for. And that is done for the love of the music, for the love of the artists, and yes, sometimes for the hate of other artists. But it's done because they want to, and there is a gap.

LC: Within the K-pop idol industry, there is a recognition that the fans come first in some ways before any big publication. Before anybody else, the fans are who the artist is ultimately accountable to because they can make or break an artist.

I have a lot of respect for fans who treat artists respectfully and not as objects to control. Fans in the United States would call up radio stations and DJs and send them gifts and say things like, "You should really check out this new song by BTS."

It was very grassroots in that way. So much of their popularity in the United States is because they saw the value in something before these bigger institutions did. They've made their artists undeniable, and so I think there's something very beautiful and powerful about that. It's a delicate ecosystem, but a very powerful one.

IA: It's such an interesting tension because that toxicity enmeshed with that hyper-loyalty and

that emotional investment, whether it's from identity or just being a fan of the music. It's a tension that really keeps the industry sustained as far as visibility for the artists and demand for the music. There might need to be a stan union at this point.

LC: It feels important to talk about the relationship K-pop and Afrobeats both have with Black American music. In K-pop's case, it's even more layered because there are real conversations about appropriation alongside general admiration.

IA: Yes, I feel like sometimes what seems to be a willful ignorance on the side of Nigerians happens when it's time to acknowledge the influence that Black Americans have had on the predecessor to Afrobeats, and on Afrobeats itself. "Afrobeat" — with no s — was pioneered by the late Fela Kuti, who was heavily influenced by Black American music after travelling to the States. Of course, it's fused with traditional Nigerian music [apala, fuji, highlife, jùjú], but there's jazz, soul, and so many other elements that Fela brought with his travels and infused into the music. Then, Afrobeats developed alongside rap music, R&B and dancehall, primarily, so it's impossible to deny the influence that Black American music has had on Afrobeats as a genre and a culture.

In many cases, there's this idea of wanting to have something for themselves or some type of ownership over this music, something that is now Nigeria's biggest export next to oil, so there's sort of this denial of facts. But the facts of the matter are that Afrobeats is a fusion of genres that includes Black American, Caribbean and native West African genres.

How do you reckon with that as it pertains to K-pop? Do you see the artists and the musicians in that world reckoning with that?

LC: I don't even like calling K-pop a genre because it's always a mishmash of a lot of different genres, and primarily genres that were



pioneered by Black Americans. For example, when you talk about different positions within K-pop, there's vocalists, there's dancers, and then there's rappers. A lot of times, rapping within K-pop is treated as if it's just another thing that you do without reflecting on the artists that you might be drawing from creatively — you're just imitating. I think that happens too often. Recognizing that rap and hip-hop is artistry is really important.

What works best is when the artists themselves, if they're writing lyrics, are genuine admirers and students of Black artists. What I found really interesting with BTS is that they really started out more as a hip-hop group — two of the first three members were underground rappers before they joined BTS. One of the leaders of BTS, RM, his favorite artist is Nas, and it's very clear how that comes through in his writing and how technically proficient they are as rappers.

It's never going to be perfect — you can't scale up the way that K-pop does without making some truly terrible mistakes, from cultural theft to racism. I think this is another area where the fans are important: Black K-pop fans are a huge segment of this movement, and have been grappling with the limitations of K-pop and its ability to really innovate or do something new with elements that have been borrowed.

There are a lot of really great Black American producers, songwriters, composers and choreographers who are finding a

lot of success working with K-pop artists. I think it's important that Black songwriters and producers are profiting from their work. It's not just about money, but about equity and recognition. K-pop has a very uneasy and unequal relationship with the work of Black musicians and their influence, and I think there needs to be greater accountability.

IA: What I do wish is that there would be more investment in infrastructural support for people who want to make music or be a part of the music industry in Nigeria and in Ghana. Ghana has its own challenges because Nigeria is the behemoth that's taken up a lot of attention despite Ghana having been extremely instrumental in the birth of Afrobeats, with Ghanaian highlife being the genre that a lot of what Nigerians are doing is derived from. But I wish there was more infrastructural support on the ground for young people in Ghana and Nigeria who want to be artists or who want to be executives in music or who want to be producers or want to be entertainment lawyers.

LC: Mmmmmm. I think what I would hope to see more out of K-Pop coverage is asking the artists who are more directly involved in lyric writing and composition and producing more questions about the art as opposed to, you know, the BuzzFeed videos that are just about personality. We can be more substantive about some of those discussions about what goes into being an artist and taking that seriously, whether they are from big groups or big companies or more indie labels.

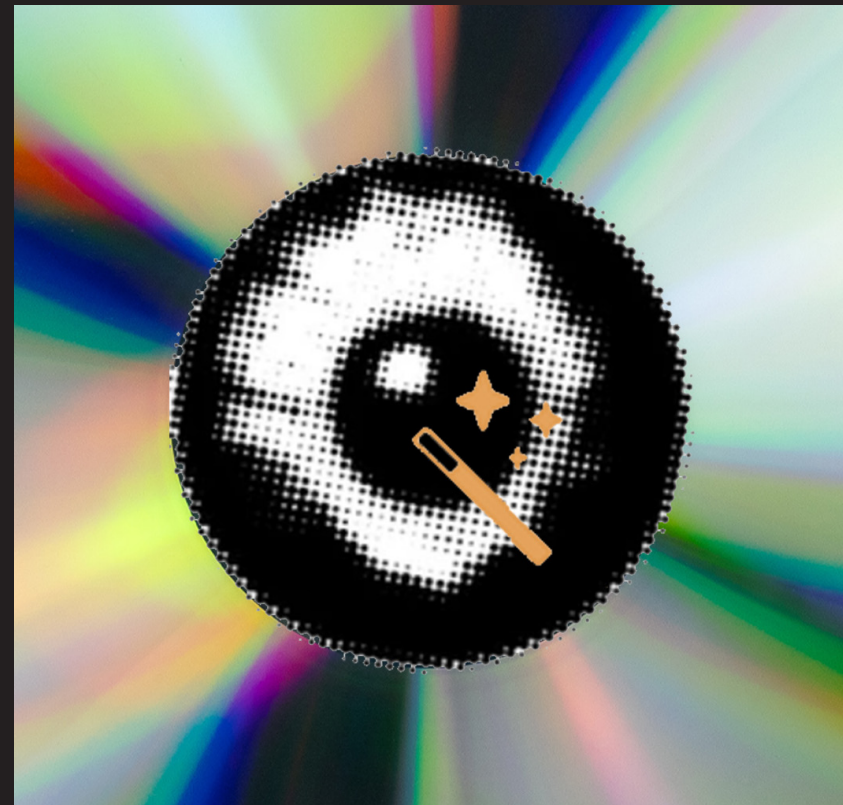
There are a lot of ways we can spotlight how artists are pushing against the cultural conservatism that you tend to see in mainstream Korean society. Journalists can and should be able to offer context for the genre and treat it with more gravity, especially when the entertainment tries to have more of a message.



THE 'RITHM IS GONNA GET YA

By **ANDRE BROCK**

WHEN CULTURE BECOMES DATA



Our music archives signal our taste, our aesthetics and our cultural identities through genre, artistic, regional, or simply pleasurable collections of auditory art. We could experience these songs over and over, forever imprinting them upon mundane or important memories that became part of who we are. As such, sharing and curation became an essential part of the music experience. In the 1960s, advances in music

The introduction of recorded music in the early 19th century introduced a technical and technological element to the musical art form. While live music will always be special, it remains ephemeral, situated and increasingly expensive. Recordings separated the artist from the performance while bringing listeners something precious: the chance to listen to the songs we loved at our own leisure and in our own spaces. It also allowed us to share those recordings with our people. Sharing is an erotic activity — one that generates affiliative bonds that bridge differences.

Recorded music created a shared *virtual* universe of individual listeners, both on intimate and collective levels. This allowed for several things to be experienced: we shared new (and favorite) songs with our friends, family and loved ones; new and old favorites could be heard in private and public spaces; those in other parts of the world could listen to the same exact song.

recording technology, from blank cassettes to dual deck cassette recorders, turned us into DJs, affording the capacity to create our own curated mixes. Our curatorial efforts ranged from “pause tapes” to custom mixes created for our personal pleasure and often shared with lovers, friends and family.

Meanwhile, a generation of music journalists who’d grown up on those very technologies and artists began to expand beyond their local arts and culture periodicals to become nationally-known names: Greg Tate, Danyel Smith, Kelefeh Sanneh, Sheena Lester, Scott Poulson-Bryant, and Elizabeth Mendez-Berry. We were blessed with an explosion of smart, thoughtful writing in outlets dedicated to hip-hop culture and music: *The Source*, *VIBE*, *King*, *XXL*, and smaller outlets such as *Ozone Magazine* and *Wax Poetics*. These new jack journalists provided what would later become known as “paratexts” — long-form writing and

interviews that both illuminated and introduced the burgeoning hip-hop culture in ways that showed its immense aesthetic and artistic power. Their work was an act of curatorial love, sharing the best of our art with the rest of the world. As the writers built their archives, they helped us discover our own.

The rise of digital music irretrievably changed music listening, collecting and even journalism. While the CD introduced listeners to the joys of crisp, clear, high-fidelity digitally encoded music in the 1980s, the rise of personal computers with CD burners (Remember Apple's "Rip. Mix. Burn." marketing campaign?) in the 2000s gave us the capacity to create "mixtapes" of personal favorites, deep cuts and popular tracks with ease, freed from the tyranny of the tape deck's pause button and the timing necessary to catch and record a clean version of your desired track.

Music enthusiasts still frequent record stores to purchase vinyl, but the MP3 made music collectors out of us all. The Internet didn't just give us access to more music, however: it also birthed a subculture of music writing free from the confines of print or broadcast journalism. When music became digital, the virtual universe of shared musical experiences grew even larger. The MP3 enabled portability—we carried immense collections on tiny digital music players capable of storing hundreds—then eventually thousands—of files. The MP3's small file size, coupled with the ease of downloading entire albums for the low, low cost of free—a boon for those with Internet access and little to no concern with copyright laws—was many people's first introduction to "social" media. Peer-to-peer file-sharing networks Napster, LimeWire, BitTorrent, the Pirate Bay, MEGA and RapidShare all

helped swell our hard drives to the point of bursting. Suddenly, small scale listening sessions—your house, your headphones—were expanded to entire online communities of like-minded (or contrarian) souls, and our pleasures became communal.

The increased accessibility of music for everyday folk also enabled a tsunami of Black digital music writing, thanks to the rise of bulletin boards and weblogs. These posts were annotations at the nascence of the digital era: before downloading music, one could browse this growing "blogosphere" to discover erudite and informed takes on samples, artists, emerging genres and artists, and even read industry drama and celebrity gossip. As established print outlets began to falter, passionate music fans and younger journalists on 2DopeBoyz, Byron Crawford and OkayPlayer—as well as entertainment blogs such as Crunktastical, Nicole Bitchie and Concrete Loop—enabled a new, afforded demographic of music fans a glimpse into the lives, lore and shenanigans of the artists they loved, increasing the pleasure we derived from the music.

While the art was mediated through technologies, Black writers and critics preserved the practice of music as a communal conversation. As music infrastructure became more codified, however, its curation became increasingly divorced from the human experience. Separating the artist from the performance encouraged fans to create databases like the Music Genome Project just before the turn of the 21st century in an attempt to categorize music they loved. The admin sold the MGP to Pandora without compensating the labor of those fans, and the streaming service began using that labor as data for algorithmic playlist creation according to mood, genre, decade or season. Meanwhile, the iTunes Store's inception in 2003 marked the beginning of the masses embracing digital streaming platforms, promising listeners access to millions of tracks from their favorite artists, new and old. Streaming services doubled down on providing listeners with massive libraries without the dangers or drama surrounding illicit downloads, free of the threat of lawsuits from industry, and at the listener's convenience, who no longer needed to do the work to find the music they wanted.

Enter the algorithm.

In 2005, armed with the aforementioned data, Pandora began to roll out its customized radio feature. The erotic pleasure of sharing by receiving a gift from a trusted intimate, new acquaintance or expert listener is unavailable when clicking on an algorithmic recommendation. The algorithm doesn't enact or even provide the enjoyment you feel when letting your favorite person or an online expert know how much you enjoyed the music. Instead, your pleasure is quantified and reduced to a signal: a click, a like, perhaps even inclusion on a playlist, are all inventoried as numbers to be harnessed by aggregation, further obscuring the importance of individual experience. In removing the human element and training itself on your inputs, the algorithm commits a sin of exclusion; it reduces your interactions with like-minded peers, while simultaneously pretending to actually care about the music that it professes to you.

But that flattening via aggregation is the point—it has supplanted the qualitative experience of sharing with cold, dry numerical assessments of "engagement," where only the largest totals signal quality. This quantification and calculation displaces fans and writers alike. Small, niche websites once afforded spaces for journalists to do deep dives into obscure artists, bands, sounds and formats. Now,

music that doesn't satisfy the maw of engagement algorithms goes undiscovered, hidden by the long tail. This robs music journalists of the opportunity to pitch articles to outlets, as those very outlets fear their contributions won't drive pageviews. Similarly, for fans, digital service providers' (DSP) algorithms have tightened to restrict music discovery, prioritizing autogenerated playlists with songs you have already signaled interest in. DSPs have attempted to address this by adding multiple autogenerated playlists by genre, but the end result is mechanical, not organic. The algorithm becomes a filter rather than a collaborator, separating the music from fans and music journalists alike. The end result is fans and journalists having little in common—there is no shared experience of enjoying music anymore, unless they restrict their tastes to the most popular or most-streamed music.

Platform capture of media and of culture has been devastating to music journalism and bloggers as well, and AI is accelerating the problem: it threatens to quantize our pleasure through algorithmic curation, without attempting to understand why we love the music in the first place. They translate harmony, melody, rhythm and culture into technical components and procedures, ordering music into "data" or "records" through mechanical, mathematical interpretations to produce recommendations shaped by disembodied logics. This capture limits innovation, diversity and agency by reducing—or removing—human insights and contributions generated through complexity, craft, spirit or aesthetics. Instead, algorithms have *optimized* culture by crafting a very narrow view of a deep canyon of humanity: there are possibilities of infinite diversity, but they're only accessible through the most rigidly defined windows of performance and participation.

We have been promised new delights through a mechanized discovery of this immense hoard. But the algorithm's performance, selection, categorization and circulation are not recognized as taste, even as it strictly choreographs our desires to the tune of developers, platforms and the music industry. What can we do to resist this authoritarian capture of our tastes and aesthetics? Like the blogs of the early 2000s, podcasts take time to establish audiences and build communities—we're currently drowning in a sea of "content" about media and the world. Instead, journalists and writers may need to return to the short-form social networks in order to build audiences again. The key, once again, is human connection—whether at a dimly lit lounge or in the bustling corridors of social media—that will allow people to reacquaint themselves with arbiters of musical taste. Even if it means tussling with the unwashed and the unlearned.

EL

MOVIMIENTO

HOW TO BUILD A LATIN MUSIC SCENE



DJ JENNY FOX

My earliest memories of reggaeton, and its kin, took place circa 2005 at Chicago Park District summer camp, under the wings of my cool preteen cousins. I remember 7-year-old me studying the signature mousse-crunched curls, straightened bangs and quotidian hoop earrings while overlapping drum patterns echoed out of different boomboxes in the Clemente High School gymnasium. “Si tú supieras que me pasa cada vez que te veo,” drowned out the devout Aventura crowd. I listened to everyone making waves del Caribe: Wisin y Yandel, Xtreme, Sean Paul and Kevin Lyttle. On field trips, “Quiero Bailar” would percolate through our school bus, with the girls reciting La Caballota (Ivy Queen)’s verse like scripture over a stank Liquid riddim. Despite my genderqueerness, singing “*Mujeeeeereeeess*” in unison was formative. Meteoric sounds tethered by a tangled Lime-Wire web. Pure Caribeña expression, a call from within to “*shake. dat. ting. miss.*” This is what it was like to go to summer camp in Humboldt Park in the new millennium.

Fast-forward to Halloween 2022: reggaeton is pouring down the staircase, and so are

By TATIANA LEE RODRIGUEZ



GATA

lesbians. The lights are dim and red. “Blood and leather suggested” is the dress code. Bodies are beginning to fuse into one, peaking beneath the fog machine’s diaphanous haze. Butches are tied up and ritualistically spanked by evil femmes. The air is muddled with the scent of sugary perfume, Fantasy Costumes, and lime juice mixed with sweat. In the heart of the Southwest side, Eden’s debut year transformed a sports bar into a slice of feral sapphic heaven, powered by perreo.

Founded by Alessandra Rios, aka DJ Jenny Fox – then known as jenniferfauxxpez – Eden was the first reggaeton-forward party to serve my city’s gender-expansive lesbian community. And though this particular Halloween was tragically targeted and shut down by cops just before midnight, Eden had already made an impact with just a handful of parties under its belt – one so strong that its two-time comeback the following year at Metro would be undeniable. A space like this was overdue, and we were primed for it. “Chicago,” Fox smiled, “is a sapphic city...When I first came on the scene, there was Strapped and Slo-mo, Smallworld [Collective] and Party Noire.” There were plenty of queer events to find pop and techno, often frequented by white lesbians. And nightlife for the city’s Black lesbians was well-established, especially thanks to DJ Ca\$h era. Eden honored this lineage while booking fierce local and international DJs that preserve the underground origins of urbano and Latin electronic.

Nowadays, everyone wants to have a Caribeño feeling. Ethnomusicologists have been mapping reggaeton entering crossover ears with the respect it deserves since the mid-aughts. Essential texts published by Drs. Raquel Z.

Rivera, Wayne Marshall and Deborah Pacini Hernandez in their foundational 2009 book, *Reggaeton*, recognized the genre’s versatility and scale, as well as its “rhythmic orientation (and embodied dance movement)...as a regionally inflected form of global pop.” But could they have anticipated just how much the Worldwide Latina Belt would widen with every crossover “win” for pop urbano?

Música urbana’s evolution, outside of commercial successes, far outpaces its critical evaluation within U.S.-based legacy media. In the areas where it does exist, it is due to the Latin-focused publications, verticals, and freelancers fighting to amplify radical Latine artistry while processing the cognitive dissonance of being called on for labor, entertainment and translation by a country that sanctions and commodifies suffering.

My *Pitchfork* review of Bad Bunny’s DeBÍ TIRAR MÁS FOTOS made my salsero tíos and Young Lord antecedents proud, but I’m not convinced that recognition from the NFL or the Grammys is what’s pushing this sonic culture into the next era. Benito’s pink casita travelled the world – but when I saw sugar cane decorating the Super Bowl stage, I wondered what my Abuela Nena would think, who lived to be 99 years old and sharecropped those fields as a girl. Is this stage capable, or even deserving, of holding this history? It’s compelling, complicated, and a reminder of how isolating being a melanated listener of urbano often is. We applaud and take pride in the success of this music, at times accepting and equating any form of allyship to anti-racist praxis, hoping that the gestures and acknowledgements will someday make room. Do these symbols carry the same weight as a direct statement? At this point, Benito can’t be our only storyteller.

At its best, música urbana has the capacity to hold queer, sexually-liberated and anti-colonial messaging. Confronting urbano’s commercialization and subsequent sterilization is the essence of its history. I want to document the range of sounds being tinkered with across Latin America, but I don’t always have that opportunity, despite my best efforts. Fighting to cover those niche artists keeping El Movimiento’s flame lit is one of my biggest challenges as an urbano critic.

I dare publications to stop sight-seeing like tourists, and to instead trust critics when they pitch artists that reflect the alternative spirit that made Benito so successful in the first place. Just as much as indie rock and pop do not represent the diversity of this country’s sonic intake, one white, cishet man can’t be the sole representative of El Movimiento, respectfully. This critical work goes deeper than hurdling over a language barrier – it’s unknotting these nonlinear histories through diligent scholarship.

PERREODISTA HUSTLE AND HISTORICISM

The riddims Jamaican reggae and dancehall provided Panama throughout the ’80s and ’90s have been sliced and diced infinitely – Stalag 17, Santa Barbara, Fever Pitch, etc. – and urbano is a self-referential genre, acknowledging its forebearers through beats or bars. Establishing a cogent timeline for this unbraided, anecdotal music history is what ignited Jennifer Mota’s career as a dembow expert. In 2019, her roughly 4,000-word article “Recognizing Dominican Dembow: From Jamaica to El Alfa” for *People en Español* was the first comprehensive history of dembow ever published. According to Mota, it took four to five months to compile the research and stitch together disparate sources for a feature that Dr. Marshall called “the definitive piece on the genre.”

Mota argued that dembow did not arrive post-Playero, and to bolster her perspective within the industry, she moved to the Dominican Republic for a year and a half to triple-verify it. As a journalist who has gotten pushback trying to clear sources for underdocumented narratives – not every fact can

be hyperlinked to JSTOR or the Washington Post – I was impressed. I once had lines cut when citing an international academic thesis, as if to say South American college credits don’t transfer. If you’re covering subcultures comprised of stigmatized, marginalized folk, be prepared to go to lengths to defend your timeline. Field research is mandatory.

Strategically leveraging your ideas is another invaluable skill for urbano journalists. You’re not only translating complex wordplay and explaining rhythm to the rhythmically-challenged, but sharing invaluable códigos informed by being active participants of this culture. If you are melanated, protect your ideas, because even the experts get taken for granted.

ANTI-BLACKNESS AND RECLAIMING THE RECORD: NOTES ON BRAVERY

Como Afrodescendiente, being Latine can be so embarrassing, and critiquing urbano is constantly checking anti-Blackness. “The Latin industry has a tendency to erase people – I don’t got time for that,” declared Katelina “Gata” Eccleston, reggaeton’s most important Afro-Latina critic and historian.

A Panamanian-Jamaican truth-teller, La Gata is an expert in spinning gold from being sidelined, recalling the time she was underestimated at a radio job interview for La Mega as a lightbulb moment on “the importance of controlling your narrative.” Even for La Gata, a trailblazer who “popularized the idea that reggaeton is intelligent” starting with her podcast “Perreo 101,” it is in no way easier to cultivate the breakneck output of her self-powered platform, Elumina Media.

La Gata’s work sets the bar of fearlessness, especially if it’ll piss off the PR team. In the midst of Bad Bunny’s historic successes, Gata is one of the few voices brave enough to question what she views as a “revisionist history” being told about the artist, especially post-“Benito Bowl.” Remember Time’s Bad Bunny profile in 2023, where he denies witnessing anti-Blackness within the reggaeton

industry? It was actually Gata who was brought on as a consultant for their questions. She encouraged them to consider his ambivalence after George Floyd was murdered. “His team came at me [in 2020] and was like, ‘Él está en la isla y no tenía su teléfono, por eso él no sabía lo que estaba pasando con George Floyd,’” she recalled. “Three years later, Time magazine [asked], ‘What have you learned?’—he says, ‘I love Tego.’” Even more, every editor and journalist with a stake in the game follows her on social media: “I say something and it ripple-effects into other publications,” Gata asserts. This topic is especially cutting when I ask about her work on Spotify’s “LOUD: The History of Reggaeton” podcast, narrated by Ivy Queen in 2021, which was directly inspired by “Perreo 101.” Though she’s glad the project exists, “LOUD” should have been the project that changed my life more financially,” she admits, wishing she had known then that, “Owning IP only matters if you know what to do with it.”

Mota tells me a similar anecdote about being bypassed by an Amazon-produced dembow documentary that bit her work. Moments like this are why she has decidedly taken a hiatus from editorial, finding that she can generate more impact behind the scenes as a consultant for record labels while writing her first book and building her boutique media company, Pynk Nomad. Gata’s also exploring new avenues to shine. She, too, has a book deal, is planning the 10th anniversary celebration of “Perreo 101,” and dropped her first EP, 3:33. These journalists are done knocking on cemented doors and accepting insincere invitations—they’ll build their own entrance.

ATRÉVETE: FINDING YOUR RIDDIM

One of the most astute culture journalists of our time, Suzy Exposito, is notorious for

carving out her own lane as an editor for a renowned legacy publication. Canonical, Plan-B perreo was still being whipped up between 2009–2014, but it wasn’t until cross-over hits were charting like 2017’s “Despacito,” followed by J Balvin’s *Vibras*, then X 100PRE’s release, that legacy publications felt forced to start paying attention. Suzy was ahead of that curve, getting her feet wet at *Rookie Mag* and reviewing punk records for *Rolling Stone* in 2015. She points to that year’s “10 Best Latin Albums” list as the seed for the publication’s groundbreaking Latin vertical, founded in 2018. On her connection to reggaeton, she self-identifies with the “alternative girl” called out in Calle 13’s 2005 hit “Atrévete-Te-Te” (“¿Qué importa si te gusta Green Day?/¿Qué importa si te gusta Coldplay?”).

Now, Exposito serves as an Assistant Editor of *Los Angeles Times’ De Los Lat* in vertical. But her experience at *Rolling Stone* began with a team of almost exclusively white men. “It took a lot of arguing and negotiating meetings for [three] years,” before she would begin to reshape the scope of arguably the most successful music magazine in editorial history, making room for Latine writers by setting a standard of excellence that gave urbano coverage a fighting chance. I asked her about the current state of inclusivity within legacy media, and she replied, “I’m a triple threat. I’m not just a woman, not just Latina, but I’m also queer... It was really important for me from the beginning to create space for other people like that, not just myself.”

Exposito was the first Latina to pen a *Rolling Stone* cover six years ago, but urbano isn’t her focus. She profiles today’s top entertainers with such aplomb, capturing the scale and stakes of their careers while zeroing in on the quirks that push the zeitgeist forward. What’s in her sauce? Exploring the gap between an artist’s persona and their true personality. This is how her tropigoth edge jumps off the page—punk yet poised even when talking about

bubblegum artists like Addison Rae. As far as urbano is concerned, the ecosystem she blueprinted is tasked with filling its unwritten chapters, and only thrives when you pass your baton.

Jennifer Mota highlights that our collective success comes from prioritizing “speak[ing] life into people.” She tells me about the night she and Exposito attended a release dinner party for Tainy, walking for what felt like forty city blocks afterwards. “[Suzy] was like, ‘I know you’re very scared right now, and there’s a lot of fear, but you advanced Dominican dembow culturally through that piece.’ It was exactly what I needed to hear that night. [In] this industry, the crabs in a barrel mentality can really fuck with people... Affirmations like that are super important, especially coming from established Latinas in this space.” Uplifting one another costs nothing, and getting past the Anglo gatekeepers is challenging enough.

PERREO HEAVEN ALL AROUND ME

In a perfect world, I would chronologize *El Movimiento* with every article I write, adding to the timeline of Black and queer labor that upholds the urbano scenes resisting dilution and confinement. Anglo-first coverage favors charting artists, and anything generally “Latin” is already viewed as niche. What’s sure to get coverage leans glossy.

DJ Jenny Fox co-hosted my favorite urbano podcast, “Radio Perris,” alongside spitfire Gage Park DJ-slash-reggaetonera Karenoid. They hold Chicago’s perreo scene down, witnessing firsthand what’s working. Their discussions on the virtual aesthetic of neoperreo, Colombia’s pervasive crossover impact, and, my personal favorite, the progressive queerness of “Yungblood Papi Reggaeton,” are topics

that we could plug into now to understand what’s next.

“Can we get back to, like, being disgusting?” Fox asks. I agree—my taste skews freaky—the more embedded in the underground, the better. And Eden’s protean underworld informed my city’s tempo no matter the venue: a quinceañera banquet hall out West and Podlasie up North, DIY venues out South and a third night at Metro, even spreading the lesbian agenda on a sunset cruise along the Chicago River. May my memory never forget the wet t-shirt contest in the middle of Lake Michigan under a pitch-black night sky and the seismic reggaeton viejo soundtracking it. As a professional lesbian of over 10 years, I am so proud to say that this is the reggaeton world that I live, dance, and dream in: equal parts core childhood memories and present-day patería.

Word to Saba, perreo heaven is all around us, but to get there, we need to pop the clout bubble. Let’s get more comfortable with saying that many popular urbano artists aren’t always landing their sound, no matter how charismatic they are. Along with calling out anti-Blackness and weird bars about “ojos chinos” (seriously, stop), we need tastemakers. Gata once said on her iHeart podcast that “criticism isn’t hating, it’s wanting more.”

My editorial heroes established this scene with no instructions, and in the same way that this music calls back to the archive, it is on us to reference the courageousness that set this scene up before we miss its magic. I want to read about the audacious little fires being built where we can find the next phenomenon. Let’s start naming them, let’s disagree, let’s get all up in there. I’m calling on all of my fellow Betty Suarezes to pick up the batons that were deliberately unpassed—the quirked-up, unequivocally Black and brown Latinas without private university diplomas—writing until the early a.m. I see you. I am you. Vamos pa’encima.

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HOW I AFFORD A JOURNALISTIC LIFE



HAND TO MOUTH, PEN TO PAPER



"SYSTEMICALLY, THESE PLACES ARE BEING DEFUNDED AND BEING SNUFFED OUT. IT'S NOT JUST ON THE INDIVIDUAL — WHERE IS THE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TO HAVE CRITICS BE RESPECTED FOR THEIR WORK? NOT JUST IN WORDS AND LIP SERVICE, BUT ALSO FINANCIALLY?"

"THE DISRESPECT TOWARDS AND THE EROSION OF JOURNALISM OVERALL, NO MATTER WHAT BEAT YOU'RE WORKING ON RIGHT NOW IN THE WESTERN WORLD, IS ALARMING. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT DEFUNDING PUBLIC MEDIA AND DENYING SO MANY PEOPLE ACCESS TO INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM. THERE'S JUST THIS ASPHYXIATION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE EXCHANGING ACCESS FOR INTEGRITY"



"I AM STILL FREELANCING AS A WRITER, BUT I'M ACTUALLY STARTING TO MOVE MORE INTO COMMUNITY ACTIVISM AND DOCUMENTARY SPACES AND TRYING TO FIND MORE FOOTING THERE. I WANT MY STORYTELLING AND NUANCE TO SERVE COMMUNITIES I WANT FLOURISH[ING] IN THE AFTERMATH OF SO MUCH BEING DEFUNDED AND TAKEN AWAY FROM US."

"I DON'T KNOW HOW PEOPLE MAKE IT HAPPEN WITHOUT LOSING SOMETHING IN THE PROCESS, WHETHER IT'S YOUR MIND OR YOUR JOB. YOU GOTTA DO A LITTLE WAGE CUCKERY IN ORDER TO DO THE THING YOU ACTUALLY WANT. I THINK IT PRESERVES THE SANCTITY OF THE HEART FOR YOURSELF, BECAUSE THEN YOU DON'T HAVE TO SORT OF [TIE] IT TO THE ABILITY TO BE ABLE TO PAY YOU RENT."



"I DO THIS STUFF WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THIS IS A MONEY-LOSING VENTURE. EVERYTHING IN THE ARTS THAT IS COOL WHEN IT'S NOT RUN BY AN INSTITUTION CAN ONLY HAPPEN BECAUSE IT'S JUST ONE PERSON SACRIFICING A LOT."

"THE REALITY OF THIS SHIT IS NOBODY ACTUALLY GETS PAID WHAT THEY'RE WORTH. WE'RE BUSTING OUR ASSES AT EVERY EVENT, GETTING THE PLATFORM AS MUCH CONTENT AND EXPOSURE [AS WE CAN]. I'VE HAD TO FIGHT MY WAY TO GET PAID [FOR] THIS, AND TO BE HONEST, I FEEL LIKE I SHOULD GET PAID MORE."



"BEING IN HUSTLE CULTURE GIG WORK IN MY FORTIES WAS NOT MY IDEAL — IT WAS NOT WHAT I WAS THINKING THAT I WOULD BE DOING. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, 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 BEEN MY EXPERIENCE ALMOST EVERYWHERE."

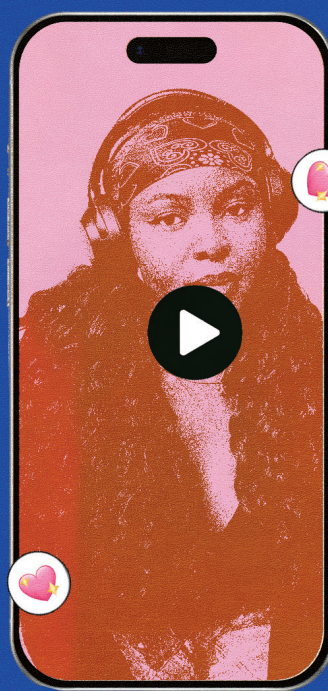
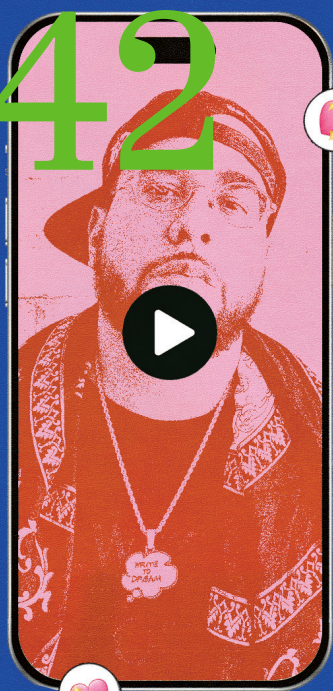


"JOURNALISTS LIKE MYSELF ARE OVERLOOKED. I DON'T EVER REALLY FEEL LIKE THERE'S ANY TRUE, CLEAR CUT OPPORTUNITIES OR GUIDANCE ON WHAT A BLACK WOMAN IN JOURNALISM, SPECIFICALLY IN MUSIC JOURNALISM, DOES AT THE 15-YEAR MARK IN 2026."

ORIGINAL UNEDITED

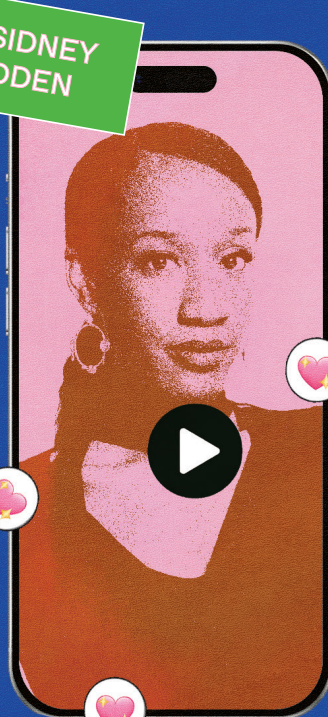
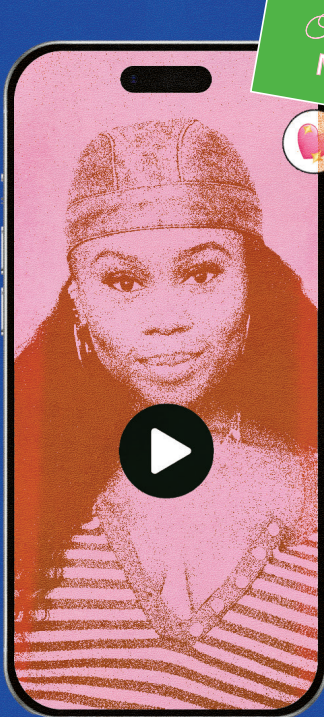
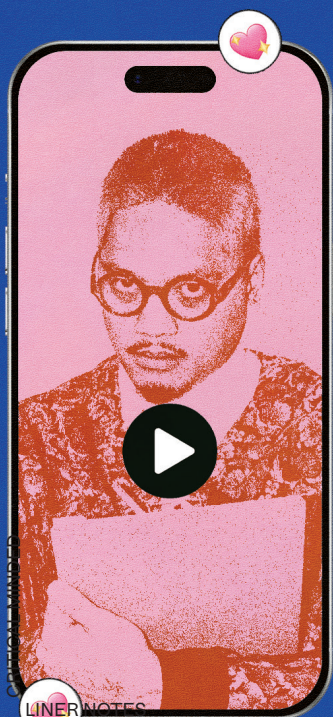
LINER NOTES





OPEN(ING) THE GATES

MUSIC MEDIA'S PIVOT TO VIDEO (AGAIN)



By SIDNEY
MADDEN

Gatekeeping is one of the music industry's favorite dirty words. A record label executive, a radio DJ or even a front desk receptionist used to hold the power to push the button on any artist's career. Music critics did too, by championing or challenging the music through thoughtful review.

But in the early 2000s, technology shifted those power dynamics. While some periodicals resisted putting their work online, the blog era allowed new gatekeepers to claw their way to the forefront via their keyboards. These newer critics made up for their lack of credentials with passion, agility, coding, and fan-to-fan community-building — moving at the speed of the Internet meant they were able to steer conversations faster than a radio host or weekly columnist. In the 2010s, the explosion of social media, music streaming and podcasting prompted another shift. Suddenly, a playlist programmer, podcaster, or bot farmer could move the needle.

The 2020s have triggered another evolution. As blogs got subsumed by bigger media brands and playlists got largely fuzzed out as background noise, new lanes of expression are opening again. Platforms like TikTok and Twitch — both digital lifeboats during the forced isolation of the pandemic — have become a driving force in music discovery and criticism. Though there's still plenty of written criticism being published, the fastest-moving critiques now take place on these video platforms, forcing critics who prefer the written word to either adapt or have their work pushed into the margins.

In this new frontier, windows of opportunity are opening and closing in never-ending succession, sometimes even collapsing in on each other. While the new guard of digital natives work to define their style and find stability, seasoned vets face a steep learning curve to meet new audiences. Teetering on the precipice of something new tends to feel awkward, especially when it's uncharted territory where rules are set by Internet engagement. As music criticism advances into its next era, critics of every generation are going through growing pains.

'A NEW PARADIGM'

"I had a call with a 'writer' the other day — and I say that in heavy quotes — because I was like, 'Show me some of the stuff you've written,'" says Mano Sundareshan, *Pitchfork's* Head of Editorial Content. "He was like, 'Oh, here's three video essays I made.'"

For Sundareshan, this is the new norm. The 28-year old acts as a bridge between the old guard and the new, representing a legacy publication that's trying to bring in Generation Z writers and readers. In this position, he's noticed the career path of intern to editorial assistant to staffer has virtually become non-existent. "Instead, what you're seeing is people basically carving their own paths a lot of the time," he says. "I have to think about watching video essays now as clips for people trying to write for *Pitchfork*, which is kind of a new paradigm."

This paradigm isn't too foreign: In 2015, mass media experienced industrywide pressure to "pivot to video." Working in print magazines at the time, I remember when publications decided to post full cover stories online the same day they hit newsstands and when behind-the-scenes videos of the cover shoot started to take priority over the cover story's words. As it turned out, this first pivot was fueled more by tech and advertising tactics than by the audience's urge to watch instead of read. What's different about this second pivot is that this time, it's genuinely driven by audience behavior.

In this current state of decentralized journalism, audiences trust individuals more than legacy outlets (Americans' trust in mass media hit a record low of just 28% last year according to Gallup polling). The dominance of TikTok has given rise to the music content creator or content critic, uploading video content specifically to recommend, discuss and review music — anyone with an opinion, a phone and WiFi can position themselves as an arbiter of taste. This means an everyday fan can gain just as much influence as a seasoned critic at a big-name outlet.

Left to right: Rob Markman, Mano Sundareshan, Elise Anick, Daniel Napp, Rosalind Wiseman, Sidney Madden

Emmuel Reyes, 29, remembers noticing the friction of a generational divide between the music he loved and the gatekeepers covering it in 2010s media. “There’s a lot of old heads that are just very hateful towards the youth, and they’re always bringing them down instead of uplifting them and trying to work with them,” Reyes says.

As a content creator, journalist and former host at Our Generation Music, a Gen Z hip-hop media platform with over 1.4 million cross-platform followers, the 29-year-old represents a generation of music fans who put creative freedom over legacy names in order to build their careers; by taking their talents to the apps, creators like Reyes aren’t waiting for a chance to be granted permission by the old guard of gatekeepers. “I don’t want to name-drop, but that Ebro [Darden] interview with [Lil] Uzi [Vert] inspired me to be nothing like that,” Reyes says, referencing a 2016 interview on Hot 97 where the radio host told the Philadelphia rapper that he would struggle to find longevity in hip-hop.

Reyes gained a large following online during the pandemic by posting about music everyday and later interviewing rap fans in lines at concerts. In 2021, his rapid-fire report on Playboi Carti’s viral Lollapalooza set went viral on TikTok and got him recruited by OGM. Outside of his own social following of 335,000 and counting, Reyes hosted an OGM interview series called Well Well Well where underground artists attend pseudo-therapy sessions with him, full of awkward silences and meme drops. “Maybe to some people, my stuff isn’t journalism because it’s like a joke, or my show comes off as a meme and my content is very comedic,” says Reyes. “But I consider myself [a journalist.]”

Elsie Ahachi started posting her own thoughts on music and recording artist interviews on TikTok in 2022 as a way to get her point of view out without having to jump through the corporate hoops of her 9–5 job in digital production work. Now the 25-year-old, who goes by @elsienoteline online, has gained a cross-platform following of 460,000 and counting. She believes what’s allowed her

to thrive on TikTok is presenting information with an editing style that “jumps out at people” and keeping the focus solely on the music, not gossip.

Masani Musa started her journalism career at Poynter Institute and The Source but, similar to Ahachi, felt stifled by the limitations of pitching to her editors. “I took the role of a journalist very seriously where I was doing the work,” Musa says. “But I wanted to insert my opinion into certain things more.” On Musa’s platform, @cultureunfiltered, the 33-year-old shares breaking entertainment news and her take on pop culture trends to an audience of 452,000 and counting, paying special attention to uplifting dark-skinned Black women in music.

When I asked how each person describes what they do, everyone characterized themselves as a multi-hyphenate. Titles like “critic” and “journalist” were mentioned, but also peppered in with “content creator,” “tastemaker,” “strategist,” “VP” and “artist relationships manager.” This signals a need not only to have a hustle mentality to do this work, but also to have multiple sources of income outside of criticism. As noted in the Critical Minded survey, criticism is still regarded as a precarious “passion project” more than a stable job. The result is a booming free

market free-for-all where the agreed-upon rules of legitimate music critique are hazier than ever.

‘EVERYBODY IS THE MEDIA’

There’s a certain stroke of genius within the music content creator space: their ingenuity to create opportunities for themselves with the tools at their disposal reflects the same energy of the music they cover. Rap music was created by freestyling over beats or scratched vinyl—making something out of nothing. Newer subgenres like bedroom pop, country trap and digicore require little more than an idea and a laptop. As technology has changed how an artist can enter the music industry, Reyes, Musa and Ahachi are mimicking the DIY spirit of the culture, representing not only irreverence of youth but also a similar level of industry disruption. What’s lost in this ethos, though, is the clarity of craft. Countless critics rose up outside of expensive colleges and institutions, but the loss of newsroom bullpens, a freelance-to-staff pipeline and the ability to work with editors means mentorship is now scarce.

“Everybody is the media,” says music journalist Rob Markman. “We all play on the same court, which is the Internet.” With more than 20 years of experience in hip-hop journalism, Markman’s career trajectory is what Sundaresan sees as a “dying pipeline.” He freelance wrote “back of the book” album reviews in The Source and XXL, worked his way up the ranks to an editor position at MTV News and then became on-air talent to the lyric encyclopedia site Genius. Markman, 46, says many of the recipes of journalistic rigor he learned along the way are being forgotten: Skills like learning how to bounce ideas off each other in a newsroom setting, how to consider multiple angles of a story and how to fact-check effectively

before hitting “publish” or “post.”

Rappers who used to hate talking to the media are now podcasters, and streamers who’ve never been of the culture feel they can posit opinions as criticism, all just to get Internet-famous. Meanwhile, staffing at touchstone publications like *The Source*, *Billboard*, *VIBE* and *Rolling Stone* has been gutted in recent years, and conglomerate acquisitions like SkyDance’s purchase of Paramount Global, have translated to uncertainty for legacy brands. The entire article archive of Markman’s former outpost, *MTV News*, was taken offline in 2024. Almost half (48%) of Critical Minded survey respondents reported being laid off at some point in their criticism career, with the most common reason for the lay off being the outlet they worked for shutting down.

Similarly, Reyes, Ahachi, and Musa say little mentorship has been offered to them, either because they’re breaking new ground with social-first criticism or they’re creating music content in a Wild West ecosystem where the difference between earnest critique and orchestrated promo is deliberately being obscured.

“I think where the line starts to blur, and I’m like, ‘Okay, this doesn’t feel like criticism anymore,’ is a lot of music creators get paid by labels, publicists and artists,” Sundaresan says. “If there’s one thing that I feel is flagrant about the new era of music curation, it’s [that] people don’t put ‘hashtag ad’ on anything.” When this disclosure of paid promo doesn’t happen, it damages the credibility of an entire ecosystem that’s still being built.

That ethical line blurs in a different spot for everyone. Musa says she has received PR gifts such as vinyls and concert tickets, but has not been approached by record labels to promote artists on @cultureunfiltered. “My audience, they come to me for a certain level of honesty.”

Ahachi and Reyes, on the other hand, have been approached by labels, artists and managers to promote artists. Ahachi’s stance on this is a complicated, case-by-case situation. She says she has accepted some opportunities “where the artist aligns with [her] taste” and declined others.

Reyes says he “absolutely” has been paid to promote music. “One of the number one things in the industry is using TikTok sounds as a creator to help push a song from one of their artists.” As Reyes explains, the main reason he did this promo early on was for income was because “you don’t really make money from TikTok itself.” When asked how he squares his own journalistic integrity with accepting this new version of industry payola, Reyes says that consideration is why he stopped doing paid promo as his platform grew. He’s still routinely solicited by label marketing representatives.

Then there’s the ethical considerations of the platforms themselves. Algorithms of TikTok and X have been proven to promote content that’s emotionally divisive – meaning the “hot takes” are pushed to the top of explore pages for fandoms to flock. This incentivizes conflict and toxic fan culture. When Ahachi, for example, posted a TikTok explaining why she was not a fan of Drake’s 2023 album, *For All The Dogs*, a screenshot the rapper

posted sent his fans to her page. “I received emails for weeks,” she remembers. “That really left a very sour taste in my mouth. It was very difficult to deal with, but it kind of exposed me to the reality of this job.”

The new reality of being targeted by fandoms online has resulted in some critics changing who and how they critique. For Sundaresan, who has noticed a “softening” of some writers in response to stan culture, that means providing his reviewers with a service that deletes their personal information offline to prevent doxxing. For Ahachi, that means choosing not to cover certain artists who’ve been known to sic their fans on people: “I call it just picking my battles.”

Some, however, have doubled down on playing into the formula, integrity be damned. “There’s people who do have criticisms or hot takes, like we like to call them, and a lot of that is disingenuous, and [done] just to go viral,” Markman says. “This is no shade, but I didn’t look up to Wendy Williams. I looked up Angie Martinez. I looked up to Sway. You know what I’m saying? And so much of Wendy’s DNA is in hip-hop media right now.”

‘STEP YOUR COOKIES UP’

As many journalists from the Critical Minded survey attest, the old models are far from utopian – critics working in traditional media outlets that cover Black and brown music are still largely white and male. When Mano Sundaresan took his position at *Pitchfork* in 2024, he became one of the few people of color in the current landscape to lead a music editorial staff. Since then, he’s brought on seven new editorial staff to the team, two of which are people of color, and made an effort to diversify the brand’s freelance pool. In adding more voices to the mix, Sundaresan says he’s starting to “see the pendulum swinging” back to critiques that don’t pull punches. “I think writers are starting to get really honest and get

offline increasingly, and just sort of say what they want to say.”

Pitchfork editorial staff, new and old, have responded to the shifting video-first market by putting more critics on camera to share reviews in video form. Even as worker-owned music publications like Hearing Things and Stereogum represent a bright spot in written criticism, the way Sundaresan sees it, the days of staying stoic behind a byline are largely over. A multiplatform approach is the new rule: “If you actually want to be successful in the normative sense, you need to make video essays,” Sundaresan says. “If you’re a really talented writer, that’s probably where your writing should be.”

Markman has moved accordingly: When budgets for the online series he hosted at Genius were cut in 2024, he decided to continue his on-air work independently while still serving as Vice President of Music and Content, producing and hosting his own music reviews on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram for his personal audience. “It was my 20th year [in journalism] when I started doing my own video, and it felt like it was day one all over again,” he says.

In the crowded field of the Internet, the pressure to be a one-stop shop to even showcase criticism has also become a relentless means of survival. “Whether you

are working for yourself or working for an organization, you do have to kind of step your cookies up in a major, major way,” Masani Musa of @cultureunfiltered says. Like most creators, for her videos with higher production value, Musa acts as her own script writer, set designer, sound and lighting tech, camera op, director and video editor. Even when she puts in all this effort, she’s still at the mercy of an ever-changing algorithm.

The platform Musa has built comes with many of the same challenges I heard many facing. Whether they’re a newer voice or not, everyone is facing the same struggles: constant pressure to adapt, being forced to do everything themselves, the risk of fan harassment and the expectation to progress without much mentorship.

In spite of – or maybe because of – the strange vortex of late-stage Internet, the content critics I interviewed are already making moves to transition offline, back to more traditional jobs in the arts. After five years, Reyes departed Our Generation Music, but is still working as an A&R at APG Records, an independent label. Musa has become a radio host at Sirius XM, first hosting TikTok Radio and now helming the satellite broadcaster’s 2000s R&B show, *The Flow*. Ahachi hopes to work more in documentary filmmaking full time.

The divide between content creator and traditional critic isn’t as wide as some might think, and the shared growing pains are proof this current shift isn’t fatal. The power of traditional press still means something, just not exactly the same thing. A traditional cover story can still shake the table, as long as it’s got social clips that can hit the algorithm independently. Instead of a feature in the Unsigned Hype column of *The Source* or a DatPiff mixtape premiere, an exclusive interview during a live stream might be considered a new artist’s first piece of legitimate press. But even if the mini mic might be more powerful than the pen right now, the pen remains foundational.

“I think if I had to describe it, it’s a house on fire, and I don’t think the firemen can save it, it’s pretty much burning to the ground,” Markman says. In the uncertainty of this in-between, the critics who will be able to rise from the ashes are the ones who keep their voices and commitment to the culture intact: “The game is the game, right? And everybody has to have their line.”



STEFFANEE
WANG



TUNING THE SIGNAL:



REVISITING
THE
PRIORITIES
OF A
MUSIC
MAGAZINE.



On June 16, 2016, I started my first day as one of The FADER's four summer editorial interns. The Editor in Chief at the time, Naomi Zeichner, assembled us in a corner conference room slash listening lounge overlooking a smoky Manhattan skyline. In explaining the lore behind the business for which we'd come to work, she emphasized something that's stuck with me: "Everything The FADER

wrote was good enough to be published in the *New Yorker*."

Earlier that afternoon, The FADER had dropped the summer music issue cover story on Vince Staples, the magazine's 110th edition in print. I sat at my desk and the feature greedily, taking in a dense—and surprisingly complicated—portrait of a reluctant rapper whose music I'd only recently started listening to. These stories, Zeichner

told us in a brief and to-the-point speech, were the backbone of The FADER's identity. The magazine strove to cover culture with the fluency and enthusiasm of its biggest participants and fans, but also with the seriousness and rigor of a political correspondent covering the White House.

Ten years since I first stepped into its offices, the company and the wider media

landscape has vastly changed—and since becoming The FADER's editorial director in January 2025, I've returned to this memory several times. The FADER's last print issue was published in 2019, and today, the function of a music blog is all but obsolete. Spotify, algorithms and TikTok have largely replaced critics as the purveyors of "music discovery." And

journalism—beaten down by layoffs and publications shuttering—seems to have lost its value, with music publications experiencing the worst of it.

One of the biggest challenges I've faced since coming on to lead The FADER is, really, figuring out the *point* of all of this now, in 2026. How does one even begin to reorient a publication in a changed

media landscape, when it feels like that landscape is intrinsically antagonistic to its existence? Where does The FADER belong and what purpose can it even serve? These questions felt impossible to answer. On the days I felt particularly lost, I'd try to remember and harness, at the very least, the conviction in Zeichner's words 10 years ago.

For a while after I started, I'd tell others in the industry where I was working, and receive the same comment: "Oh, I didn't realize The FADER was still a thing." From 2020 to 2024, the publication had fallen out of favor and lost much of its digital reach: like many other publications, the pandemic, loss of advertising dollars and repeated layoffs meant that the sudden arrival of the attention economy and short-form video left what remained of the magazine's staff behind. My first priority was to reconfigure an editorial team that could address modern day demands to get us not just productive but on the playing field. I expanded our social media team with an emphasis on



video production and editing. Our editorial plan now came with a whole new role of social video producer.

All of these adjustments, however, only addressed a short-term (but important) problem: keeping the train chugging along. I still didn't feel like I'd gotten any closer to answering the existential "why" of it all. Our team was, and still is, small. Only five people manage all the old platforms and mediums, plus all the new ones that feel like they're popping up daily. Trying to figure out how best to manage my team's energy to optimize (as much as I despise the word) the impact of what we publish daily has required a massive shift in understanding the function and form of music editorial in the social media dominated age.

As an example: If Rihanna announces an album (knock on wood), maybe the *most* important thing for us isn't necessarily a post a story on the .com but to the Instagram feed first, followed by a video on TikTok and only *then*, something more fleshed out and informative for the website. This is a hard thing to relearn as someone who took news writing 101 in college and started as a blogger; I constantly feel myself fighting the instinctive urge to hit the CMS as my first impulse.

In fall 2025, a student from New York University asked me to come to their school and speak to a small club of aspiring music writers and radio DJs about how I was running The FADER in the year 2026. I gave them a spiel about the publication's new social-first direction and reiterated our commitment to telling the same in-depth and rigorously reported stories we'd always told. But when I asked them what they wanted to see more of from music media publications, a boy in the

back row said they'd read GQ's 9k-word profile about MJ Lenderman and wished more outlets would publish stories like that. Someone else griped about the celebrity-ification of music journalism and interviews. Everything felt too short, boring and surface level, they said—or worse, over-sensationalized and pandering. Some barrier in my brain felt like it broke in that moment: If these were the exact kinds of people we wanted to be engaging with our stuff, there was still hope for us yet.



The rapid change in an algorithmically dominant media industry has caused a lot of misunderstandings about our new reality. The ubiquity of video and short-form content has led some to believe that the medium is somehow incompatible with deep learning, or that people don't even want it—but educational content and video essays are the formats generating the highest engagement these days. What that tells me is that there's still a place, somewhere in the attention-driven online ecosystem, where the stories I loved and that The FADER has always told not only exist, but are genuinely needed. They just look different from how we remember them.

It may seem counterintuitive, but I believe more than ever that the priorities of The FADER have not changed. People will forever still want to listen to good, new music, and they'll want to talk about the good, new music (and experience other people talk about it too). They'll want to learn about their favorite artists—without the bullshit and performance. As AI and declining media literacy continue to rise, I remain convinced a commitment to reportage and journalistic rigor

is the only thing that'll hold up against the murk being churned. It's not only doubling down on what you've always done, but also doing it exceptionally well.

The FADER's original mission was to highlight the music the founders and staff loved. Along the way, it evolved to look ahead to the future—in many ways, it's a mission that's evergreen. This past January, The FADER published its first digital cover since 2024—it's the first of six coming in 2026. We resurrected the publication's mini docs, which now come with a bevy of social accoutrements and videos. And we're experimenting with more dynamic, conversational ways of storytelling, critiquing and sharing music in online communities on TikTok and Instagram, and through in-person events.

The results have been immensely promising, not just in pure numbers, but atmospherically: Every day, over the span of six months, I heard more chatter from people in real life and online about The FADER. I think if we keep doing all of that right—ironically—it might lead to us doing something The FADER hasn't done in nearly seven years: publishing an actual print magazine.

A PATH TO A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



By ANDRE GEE

I started culture writing in 2014, and my ultimate goal was a staff job. I coveted the idea of being an in-house music critic. I admired writers like Craig Jenkins, Lawrence Burney and Jeff Weiss, who talked to the artists of the moment and shook the table with their commentary. Their opinions helped shape the way people viewed rap and hip-hop culture at large. When I got my first staff job in late 2020—one of the few available in a rapidly depleting market—I felt like I had arrived. But gradually, I began to learn the cruel truths of the industry. I wasn't just doing music journalism: I was in the music *business*. 🎵 People have lauded me for writing quickly and writing often, a dynamic I've become accustomed to after five years of being beholden to the demanding news cycle, deadlines and the whims of editors—to be frank, I still grapple with the effects of being conditioned to that breakneck pace. I was rarely asked

about long-term goals, or how I wanted to grow as a critic. The cratering workforce resulted in poor editing, and my pieces often had embarrassing typos. I started to feel like a basketball player on a team with coaches who just threw the ball out and let the team have at it. I was just a means for outlets to fill the content calendar, not a valued employee.

The reality is that outlets now prioritize relationships and revenue over journalistic integrity. I've seen that rupture firsthand: I was once told by an editor that our outlet "needs" the subject to like the profile written on them, in order to leave the door open for future business opportunity. A peer of mine told me that they were pushed to raise their rating of a popular artist's latest album. Last October, I woke up and saw Rolling Stone had devoted the entire front page to Taylor Swift, unbeknownst to me — and if that

wasn't enough, they started crankin' out Hasbara on the state of Israel. I realized that even if I didn't get laid off, I was going to end up having to resign anyway.

Working on the andre gee newsletter offers editorial freedom, which is imperative to me: in fact, every achievement is that much sweeter when it's independent. I don't have to write about things that don't excite me as a critic purely for engagement, metrics or search engine optimization: Profiling the popular artists I'm indifferent about, covering manufactured controversy in the pursuit of virality and producing analyses on hip-hop's Billboard chart health are no longer required of me. Writing on my own platform allows me to resist that inclination to write fast and to spend more time with essays instead, making the most resonant work possible. Most importantly, I no longer have to worry about shrinking my perspective to appease a white institution: For instance, I can finally use the word "genocide" in relation to what's happening in Palestine.

Even though my path feels freer, it's not without obstacles — finances are a primary concern. Only 10% of the writers surveyed in Critical Minded's 2026 report, *Beautiful Struggles: Pop Music Critics of Color and the Critical Landscape*, made above \$76,000 annually. I was once one of those writers, but my new annual revenue — which is steadily growing — still isn't nearly enough to pay my rent. I'm now within the group of respondents whose career consists of "a patchwork of freelance assignments, self-published work and other 'labor of love/passion projects,'" that have to be coordinated around other responsibilities, "including non-criticism-related jobs/careers, family obligations and other commitments."

This expansion also demands a deeper social presence that I'm loath to pursue. I, like many of my colleagues, simply want to be a writer: to craft my pieces and go about my life. I begrudge the idea of being another media personality peppering people's timelines by blathering into my phone about the day's hot topic. My resistance is at odds with our

current reality, however, and as a freelancer, it's an even more precious avenue. As one writer told *Critical Minded*, "being very vocal and present on [X] 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." That also holds true for me: My viral 2020 Substack newsletter pieces helped build the profile that led to my first staff writer position in November 2020. Since then, I've appreciated the utility of meeting people where they are. To that end, I've decided to jump into making video content that makes sense to me, with more emphasis on voiceovers than on-camera time.

The things that I used to have institutional support for are all on me — I'm still figuring it all out. I used to be able to rely on the hefty followings of an outlet's social pages to help amplify my work. That's no longer the case, and metrics are no longer vanity, they're tied to my earnings potential. I'm also not naive enough to think that the media's next ecosystem is thousands of laid-off journalists paying each other \$6 a month. But despite these qualms, I feel freer in my craft, and that matters more to me than anything.

As one experienced writer raised while speaking to *Critical Minded*, "Where do you find a place where you can stay for ten, 20 years? ... I'm concerned about young writers not finding that long term space to have a relationship with their readers." Another surmised: "The machinery of music journalism, the business model, has completely collapsed." In its demise, I think it's best for us all to leave legacy media behind and ideate new paths. It's important for all of us culture workers to find different ways to lean into each other, such as co-op outlets, mutual aid and mentorship for young writers and editors.

Not everyone has had that same opportunity, so I know my course isn't for everyone — but along with that community focus, I want to show writers who share my passion that the newsletter doesn't have to be marginalized as a glorified blog post or word salad wasteland. There's necessary criticism and reporting happening there: and it can be lucrative, too.

One March morning, I got a sign that I was on the right track. Amid several emails and phone notifications was a notice from Substack informing me that I was a bestseller on the platform. Having

hundreds of people willing to tap in with me is a rare blessing that I don't take lightly, but I also chalk up to the sustained quality of my work. After all, my newsletter is what got me attention at notable outlets in the first place. A close colleague told me, as my profile was rising and exciting freelance opportunities began flooding in, that these outlets were reaching out because of *my* insight — I had the power, and should be discerning about who I give it to. I now recognize exactly what he was saying: I've honed in on that power for my own purposes and have been successful with it. But after the high of receiving the achievement, I got back to work. The Substack bestseller badge comes with an orange check on your profile, but it doesn't, as far as I know, come with any perks or additional resources. It doesn't offer anything but reassurance. The rest is up to me.

The world needs perspectives that are more radical than an advertising and relationship-dependent institution is likely to run. I've recently begun working with a collective of Black writers, editors and other culture workers to create industrial solutions for others like us. We're all fundamentally aligned against the industry's labor exploitation, deprioritization of journalistic ethics and lack of respect for Black culture — and everything we're ideating is in furtherance of integrous journalism that gives Black arts and culture scenes the coverage, framing and criticism they deserve. Any other writer developing communities of labor resistance has to hold themselves to comparable values: otherwise, we're simply perpetuating existing ills.

I'm no longer a proponent of journalism within the broader music business, but I've been able to cultivate a self-sustaining model while holding true to my values, and I'm proud of that. Being able to pursue my work from that vantage point is what I want for more journalists. I hope we can use the insights of the survey to create more apparatus for writers of all levels to be able to do the muckraking, reporting and commentating that the media desperately needs. It's a critical time for culture journalism, which has become so PR-adjacent that young people don't even know what real journalism consists of. We have to amplify and support those brave enough to still pursue this arduous craft — before the fundamental function of journalism is forever eroded.

By
TIMMHOTEP
AKU &
ATOOSA
MOINZADEH

ESCAPING THE SPIRAL MUSIC MEDIA'S VICIOUS —●— CYCLE —●— OF EXPLOITATION —●— AND HOW —●— WE BREAK IT

Low wages, precarious employment, dwindling readership, and increasingly devalued labor: It's clear that music criticism as a profession is in crisis, but what's not so clear is how we got here and what can be done about it.

With these questions in mind, two music writers from different generations, Timmhotep Aku and Atoosa Moinzadeh, sat down to discuss the state of the art and industry. Their perspectives are not only informed by the eras in which they began their careers (the early aughts and the 2010s, respectively) but also by socioeconomic class and their racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Both working class and non-white—Moinzadeh is an Iranian-American woman and Aku is a Caribbean-American man of African descent (read: Black)—their marginalized identities inform not only their experiences but also how they understand the responsibilities of cultural critics to society writ large.

Neither of these cultural workers have the luxury of accepting the anti-labor changes in the industry as irresistible, irrefutable, or irreversible acts of God or nature. In truth, these deliberate and often arbitrary business decisions are made by people and institutions bent on disempowering workers to maximize profit. According to a Critical Minded 2026 report, roughly half (49%) of pop music critics reported earning \$5,000 or less per year from music criticism. That same number of pop music critics also reported earning \$90,000 or less annually in household income, suggesting other streams of income are essential to survival.

Zooming out, the Poynter Institute estimates there has been a 75 percent decline in the number of local journalists per 100,000 of population in the U.S. since 2002. This contraction results in declining media literacy and social alienation: Northwestern's

University's Medill School of Journalism found that, as of October 2025, 50 million Americans have limited to no access to local news.

For *Liner Notes*, Aku and Moinzadeh focus in on late-stage capitalism, the question of who the cultural worker serves, media companies subsuming the worker, and beyond.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Who Do You Serve?

TIMMHOTEP AKU: How do you personally define cultural journalism and criticism?

ATOOSA MOINZADEH: As cultural workers we're tasked with the greater responsibility to understand, critique, contextualize, and archive art and its respective movements, which includes unearthing what it says about the larger human condition.

Archiving is about making sure that we're documenting trends, voices, and movements within culture, art, and music. Whether that's through an interview or a field report, we make sure that first-person, organic perspectives are preserved and expanded upon.

We're also iterating off of each other. For me, as a music journalist who primarily focuses on hip-hop, I think this work operates the same way the genre does: we're taking this thing, we're flipping it, we're making it into something new. Sometimes we're reintroducing it into the conversation. Sometimes, we're explaining how a newer piece of work is in conversation with an older piece of work. We're kind of operating from similar principles through our documentation.

TA: You said a lot of really important words that keep on coming up in my conversations with writers these days—especially as so much news, history, and generally, information, is being decontextualized. There is so much erasure that's happening in terms of histories. You said, “documenting,” you said “archiving,” you said “contextualization,” you said “reporting.” When I think about my role as a cultural worker who happens to write, to edit, to be a critical voice, I look at those things as the bedrock of what I do. And I understand that people lose the meaning of that word “media”, which literally means we're the intermediary between the general public and these phenomena that we cover via our reporting and our criticism. My attitude towards music criticism, and generally cultural criticism, is that it must be performed with a sense of duty. I am in service to the people who are the audience.

I think oftentimes that gets blurry and some people think they're there to exert authority as opposed to act in service of said audience. For me, that's never really been a thing that's appealing. We're here to put things into context for people so that they understand the full breadth of what that thing is and then make the decision of whether and how they engage with said phenomenon.

AM: I feel like what you just said made me think a lot about another important question: *Who do we serve?* I've always viewed journalism as service. We live in a world where we have to frequently question the motivations of those who call themselves journalists: *Who is this person trying to serve?* Because I've noticed there are people who are self-serving. Then there are people who are serving a larger entity, whether it's a record label, or a brand, or an artist. I think that's a line that gets muddled a lot. They have an aim, to quote you in many of our other conversations, to protect or preserve something called "status quo." You invoke the status quo a lot when you question power structures, and I think that that phrase is something to think about and center in this conversation. We're talking about what the status quo is and how it hasn't served us or the greater public. We need to ask ourselves: *How do we challenge the status quo? How do we change the predominant default culture around not just music itself, but how people consume it and how they engage with it?*

TA: As people who come from marginalized identities, our critical intervention is going to be different than that of those who benefit most from upholding the status quo. That

means that we are engaging with this art to tell these stories that are often untold or told without important nuance. We're adding a layer of nuance that, for lack of a better term, humanizes and gives the full breadth and personhood to the subjects that we're covering. The fake objective view of things—the view from nowhere, they call it—tends to privilege status quo perspective, even though it says it has no bias to it.

Part of the duty I feel I have is to make the reader not only more knowledgeable, but more literate and discerning. And that comes from nuance. It's not just referencing whatever rapper I wrote about at a dinner party, it's about engaging with whoever this rapper is, understanding what the milieu is from which they come from, and then having that speak to a greater truth being told about our society in general. Not just like a fun fact, but a humanizing fact, I guess.

The Culture of Work

TA: The media industry is extremely classist. There's a high barrier to entry for people who don't come from the highest rungs of society as it pertains to socioeconomic status.

I think there was a blip in which people could kind of get in and there was this abundance that you were talking about a decade ago. Where you had all these different platforms, and if you could write and knew about the subject, you might've had a shot. I think the way things have developed has become exclusive in a very, very sinister way. This is no longer the domain or a place where a working class person can enter and prosper.

I come from a working class background and this was a viable thing in which I could enter without having whatever elite pedigree to guarantee entry, but I think that's not the case anymore. The cultural worker of today has to figure out how to sustain themselves materially while doing the work that they care about, and with the understanding that the industries at play don't have their best interests in mind now, and possibly never have. You have to figure out what to do with that and if it's worth exerting the amount of passion and attention and time it takes to do the work.

I think it's all right for us to admit that many of the powers that be in the media industry are no

longer in the business of providing contextualization or useful information. They're in the business of sensation.

AM: Agreed. These publications also operate from a place of knowing that they *need* us and our expertise. They need our track records and the level of trust we've cultivated with readers. Yet at the end of the day, the goal is to extract that labor: to absorb what the critic or the journalist brings into their ecosystem and then dispose of that individual when and how they see fit. They then assume that legacy or that intellectual property as theirs. Decontextualizing the work and abstracting it from the source.

TA: Yes. People are being subsumed into brands. The brands, they benefited by getting the right people at the right time, to lend them credibility, to give them their cachet. But will also chew you up and they spit you out.

I've seen this happen to people who work for the most prestigious media brands. I think the only way that we resist that is by doing our own thing and building power. I think that word has to come up in this conversation a lot more. All the things I'm talking about are ways for us to have leverage and more power. If we don't build power for ourselves, we'll never have the ability to collectively bargain, and we'll never have terms that land on our end. Because of the nature of the industry now, I feel myself being coerced into a type of thought and a type of reactivity that is antithetical to my purpose for being here.

AM: I often feel the same way.

TA: There are times when I'm feeling insecure about it and asking myself, oh, *Why am I not adapting to it?* And then I had to do some soul searching and be like, oh no, because this shit is actually anti you. This is anathema to you because it should be. And that leads me kind of to a larger point that you touched on and what you said. Systems create behavior. Systems corral us into behaviors and ways of thinking and suddenly into ideologies.

When I talk to some of my younger colleagues and peers, all they know is cranking. I feel a little bit of sadness, but I also understand that this is the behavior they've been corralled into. When I think

of the scarcity mindset that leads to competition over crumbs, I understand that as part of system behavior. We're all being kind of corralled into these behaviors that make our work less valuable, and deprioritize our mental and physical health. That's another trend I've seen: people who do the work that we're doing going insane and having mental health issues that go unaddressed, because they have to keep up with the pace of an industry that does not give a fuck about their health.

AM: Exactly. Is it more about preserving your integrity and making meaningful work? Or is it about the accolades, even if it means being absorbed into a system that doesn't care about you? I'm constantly asking myself, *Am I having a hard time adapting or is this just in conflict with my values?* I see the new cycle and the accelerating churn as it pertains to music, but then I realize, *I'm a curious thinker, and the current climate is antithetical to curiosity.* If something lights my spark, I want to know everything about it, I want to sit with it. That all involves slowing down.

This brings me to the intellectual resistance that we have to do as cultural workers, even if on the outside it might look a certain way when we slow down, like we're "falling behind." The volume of work that I've published has significantly gone down in the past year, especially since I went independent after leaving a financially exploitative situation at a magazine. Does that make me feel insecure? Definitely. But, you know, there's just a level of integrity that I need to preserve if I'm going to keep doing this work—otherwise, I'm just contributing to the problem.

That need to slow down naturally brings up the conditions that make our work tenable and possible. So much of this conversation is about the journalist as a worker, and the journalist's material conditions. You can dream and hope for your work to be a certain thing, but if you're not being set up with the resources in order to carry that work out, or you're not in environments that support you, you run into something the artist and the journalist have in common: Not being seen as fully human by the powers that be. That kind of dehumanization can break you.

TA: The story of capitalism, especially in the past, I'll say 40 years, has been one of deregulation and anti-labor practices benefitting those who have the most money and power. Media, being an industry that is dependent on other industries, often mimics the type of labor relations of other those industries.

I think the media industry has definitely reflected what we see in Silicon Valley. In the last 25 years, we've been sold on this idea of a future of convenience, ease and seamlessness. But that was really a Trojan horse for anti-labor practices. Technology doesn't erase labor or the need for labor; it just obscures it. For example, a tech company builds a humanoid-looking robot and they tell you the robot is autonomous, but then you find out there's somebody controlling it remotely. You look up something using artificial intelligence (AI), they tell you this is the LLM [large language model] telling you something, and then you find out it's really somebody in Africa, or in a bullpen in South Asia, right?

In that same time period, the media industry as a whole started to really devalue what we create, and the people creating the work themselves, under the guise of optimizing things for the consumer. What used to be an article becomes a list that is, by nature, reductive. What used to be written by a person gets written by AI. I think all of those things are general societal trends in terms of decreasing the amount of money that workers take home and increasing the amount of work that workers have to do in their roles. Even the people I know who are blessed and well positioned enough to be [employed] at whatever company are now working what used to be three jobs as one job. Freelancers complain that assigning editors at publications are not responding to their

itches in time, or the edits and direction they give aren't good enough, but the people who are inside these buildings don't have time to do anything because of the work conditions. It's all about churn, it's all about volume. And that's driven by a 24-hour news cycle. That's driven by this desire to constantly "feed the beast" as they say. All that adds up to worse conditions for labor.

AM: Tech—and now, media—have largely established themselves as anti-worker, and thereby anti-"social good". In 2017, we witnessed the "pivot to video" cycle. This was against the backdrop of social media's importance being ramped up and over-inflated, and as a result we witnessed the devaluation of long form and written content, which really limits how deep we can go with our work. We had websites like Mass Appeal completely nuking their story archive overnight. Then you had the intense shifts that happened because of COVID in 2020. COVID pushed a lot of people to digitize things further, whether it was because of shelter in place or the economic disruption that allowed companies to justify slashing their budgets and workforces.

AM: It all comes down to the fact the billionaire class is kind of just gambling. The "market" is a casino, a sandbox for them to play in, and that wanton gambling is impacting our livelihoods all while contributing to a larger crisis of disinformation and decontextualization.

TA: Straight up. To your point about the billionaire class—the trillionaire class, which is coming—is that they put themselves in a position to be able to wag the dog. The tail is wagging the dog. It's influencing what we talk about, how we talk about it, and where and when we talk about it.

AM: What has occurred to me over the years is that the billionaire class—the people who hold the reins when it comes to technology—are manufacturing demand. "People want more video content. People want more social media content. People want AI-generated content," even if people aren't explicitly asking for that. This forces the cultural worker to think to themselves, "I need to adapt my skill set. I need to get ahead of the shifts in the market," which is a fool's errand. I experienced this when I participated in two different unionization efforts that were dismantled with union busting: first at

medium.com in 2021, then at Bandcamp in 2023. Both were largely motivated by some combination of COVID's impact on the economy, Big Tech, cost-of-living increased, and AI, and how those things were threatening our rights. Big Tech won, both times. When those union-busting layoffs at Bandcamp happened, I faced consequences as someone who was a labor organizer. I was retaliated against. I spent two years without a full-time job, freelancing nowhere nearly enough to survive.

THE CULTURAL WORKER OF TODAY HAS TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO SUSTAIN THEMSELVES MATERIALLY WHILE DOING THE WORK THAT THEY CARE ABOUT

TA: Another problem with the gutting of media is that we're also losing our ability to put all that into context and describe that as an actual pattern that we can respond to, because there is virtually no critical media in the mainstream. Tech media, for the most part, was very evangelistic when it came to these cycles happening. And where we land after all that evangelism is with the shit end of the stick to be clear about it. And I think as cultural workers, we are trying to stave off our obsolescence so that we can have some type of way to earn money and sustain ourselves. But at a certain point, we have to ask ourselves, "What are we in this for and how do we push back against these anti-labor forces?"

AM: People in our line of work are so caught up with survival that they can't even keep their imaginations alive. They don't have the space to think, to synthesize those thoughts, and to then put them out into the world. And that shrinks the collective imagination and ability to think critically.

TA: The turnaround gets quicker when you have the churn of the 24-hour news cycle. So now an idea that may have had time to gestate and develop over months because it would be a feature in whatever publication, can't exist. You can't have the big idea that's well thought through. So you get the thing that is going to be more of a knee jerk reaction. It's more reactive than thoughtful all the time. And this is how we regress in terms of discourse. The discourse becomes more polarized. The thoughts become more simple. They become more loud, maybe more triggering, maybe more attention-grabbing, but not thoughtful.

The public, in general, is being stripped of its ability to think. To think critically, to think gainfully, think productively, to think for themselves. And I think music criticism, as trite as it might seem to people, is an avenue toward that. Art criticism is an avenue toward being able to be a critical thinker in general. And so for me, even though the circumstances are terrible, I still push back in my own ways to try to figure out, *how do I maintain my lifestyle? How do I carry out this mission of serving the public?*

Our power has been atomized and it's on us—through collectivity—to put it back together so that we have some leverage and all this cachet that we bring to these brands is something that we can also benefit from. It's not to say that we don't want to work with these large, corporate media brands at all, but we have to do something that changes the math so that it's not such a one-sided relationship of extraction. I think that only comes with us doing the things that are relevant to the audience that the audience engages with and cares about on a deep level. The work I try to do is meant to do that. It's supposed to be the remedy to the ephemeral post. Whether that work takes the form of something on video, audio, written word, or an experience.

Challenging Status Quo

TA: So how does the music critic, the cultural journalist, how do they build power at a time like this?

I think it's, in part, about moving opposite to the ways that the systems would corral us into working. Hyper-individualism is a *dub* right now. We can't do that. Right. The rat race shit, the fast churn, all that shit. None of that benefits us in terms of building power. You know, and it also takes our attention from what we should be building at the time.

And not to just be harping on the problems, but I want to introduce what I feel is the solution and that's collective thinking and collective working because in the absence of that coming from down on high, from whatever publication you work for we have to do it ourselves.

AM: We do. I think in the short-to-medium term that looks like collectivizing, setting universal terms and conditions for the work we do and upholding them as a group. But those hyper individualistic folks? The ones in service of themselves, and not the collective? They're always going to exist. That's the thing about resistance. Everybody's not gonna get on board tomorrow. It's going to be a lifelong struggle, to move in the opposite direction. We're always going to be swimming against some sort of current.

TA: I also think we have to create better systems for what we want to do outside of those pre-existing systems that are based on the values that we have which prioritize workers' well-being and providing a service to the public. We gotta do stuff that is just based on different ethics.

So every time people announce a management change at whatever publisher or publication. And there's this person who's gonna be the head of this. How are they gonna make it different? What values and ethics do they have that are different

from the last person's? Even if we self-publish and we collectivize and we say, all right, we're gonna get together and we're gonna do this on our own and we're gonna self-fund it and we're gonna find the question at the foundation has to be, how is this gonna be different from what we came out of that pushed us out, right? And I think that means it can't be sexist.

AM: Absolutely.

TA: That means it can't be homophobic. That means it can't be xenophobic. That means it can't be anti-Black. That means it has to be pro-labor. These are the things that I look at. If that's in your DNA, I can rock with you and you might have a future here. But if you just want to be the smaller version of whatever unnamed, corporate media company then I wish you no luck. I'm not here for the reproduction of the things that got us to where we are right now at all.

AM: I want to see those of us who have been in the field for a long time mentor folks more. We hold the knowledge. We've been there. We've done it. Who's to say we can't pass it down? Younger writers, most of them don't have access to mentorship at the moment. How can we facilitate something that makes younger folks and for future generations feel as though this work is something they can pursue? We are already observing, in real time, younger folks who can and should be getting into this line of work bowing out before they've even had the opportunity to take off.

TA: I think when people hear collectivizing, they think of getting together with their peers, colleagues, and contemporaries to do something. But I think a truly impactful type of collectivizing, which is what I've been trying to do for the past few years, is one that is multi-generational and intergenerational, in which people are not just dealing with the those who are doing the same work at the present, but also in community with younger folks who are just about to get into it and presenting ourselves as a resource to these folks so that they come into it thinking about themselves as part of a collective thing and not just like thrown to the wolves where they have to kind of claw their way to the top. And I think people assume that if a person's an elder that they don't need mentorship themselves. I think that's incorrect. There's also a ton of people who have maybe moved

on beyond writing for publications or done things adjacent to it. Say they've ended up in film, or television, writing, or book publishing. I think those people are also part of the collective.

I think, and this is a very, you know, kind of indigenous way of thinking: the family, the cohort, all that is multi-generational. The expertise, the shared knowledge comes from people from different walks of life. The young person who's coming into this music journalism, cultural journalism, cultural criticism thing, they offer a view of what is relevant right now that a person who is older may not have. I think that bridge between generations is a very powerful thing if you wanna talk about combating status quo and doing something great and different.

It's on us to kind of be this change that we want to see.

AM: Absolutely. You can't approach this from a place of pessimism, right? Obviously, there's a degree to which we have to be realistic, a degree to which we have to be critical, but there's got to be that little seed of belief that things can be different. We can't approach this work from a place of thinking the path is paved for me and I just have to follow it. We have to actually create our own forks and pathways and reinvent the wheel a little bit.

TA: And I think you only get the best perspective when people are allowed to be thoughtful. We're the only people who can give ourselves permission to be thoughtful, to think long range, to think big. Because again, the systems that are around us don't allow for that. They don't make for that. They don't care about that shit.

AM: I agree. We're kind of at this critical moment. I'm trying to be little optimistic as well because I fundamentally understand that sometimes—a lot of times—things need to catch on fire and like things have to be really fucked up before the actual positive changes come in. We are already seeing an uptick in small press and independent publishing. I think a lot of people naturally are gravitating towards physical forms of media because, you know, to be frank, the internet is not a place that you want to be all the time, if at all, right now. So just being able to engage with these things. off a screen, is really, really appealing, even surprisingly to young people.

TA: I think I'm definitely heartened by the resurgence of blogs, even if the blogs don't exist in the ways we think they will. Like for instance, like there's an Instagram page called SoundFynd and unlike some other Instagram pages that are more sensationalist they're big on contextualizing what's happening and I think that's really exciting and I want to see more of that. It gives me hope. And I want to be able to support those people. If you've got a blog and it's aligned with my interests, you might see me on the blog commenting. I'll offer myself up to give people advice on things. I think being in community with folks and being a part of this collective thing means being proactive about engaging with what you like

I think people are hungry for substance. They're hungry for something that they can really hold onto. And so for me personally, that means that you're gonna see... a physical publication that I'm a part of coming out. That means you're going to see these curated events where I gather people to talk and experience things together. Right. That means you might see film and video work. And I would say if we were corralled to have this kind of Swiss army knife approach to doing our work to feed the beast and the pivots of Meta or Facebook at the time or whatever. Then that means that we do have an aptitude for some type of versatility. Why not apply that versatility and that rigor to doing work across different mediums that is aligned with our ultimate goal of serving the people as opposed to serving a corporation, as opposed to just making people dumber. We know as writers that we are multifaceted media workers and cultural workers. Let's use our powers for good. That's how I look at it.

AM: I see it that way too. We've been so adaptable, ready to pivot at the drop of a hat, ready to expand our skill sets. We're resilient enough to weather really, really uncertain times. We should be doing that for each other, instead of to benefit some media conglomerate.

TA: Or to benefit the fucking fascist status quo if you want to be straight up about it.

