



Intro:

Evelyn McDonnell,
"The Feminine Critique: The Secret History of
Women and Rock Journalism"

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You love rock 'n' roll. You grew up in the American wasteland and a hundred *Teen Beats* and three Springsteen albums down the line, you dreamt that rock singers could take you away from small towns and small minds. Or you grew up with a Catholic block: a rosary of forbidden desires that you channeled into fantasies about rock star heartthrobs. Or just as you were discovering that being female meant either surrendering to the shadows or building a cauldron of resistance inside, you also discovered that punk—or rap, or metal—could vent your anger. Or you didn't even particularly care about music, but in a bar one night as you watched guys trade album critiques like football scores, you butted in with your own opinion and enjoyed their shocked reactions.

The more you got into the music, the more you saw that your options were limited. You could be a musician: get dicked around by business people, be treated like a sex object, then succumb to the drug culture that

keeps artists under control. Or you could try your luck in the biz—become a secretary, get harassed by your bosses, and, maybe someday, become a publicist. Or you could be a well-loved groupie, maybe marry one of your heroes and get dumped down the line for a model with seamless features where your skin wrinkles.

You decide to become a rock critic, so that you can speak your mind, maintain your independence, try to confront men at their own level. Because there are few women like you, you find work, but your pieces are shunted to the fringes—you're a token, a sop to charges of sexism. The more you're marginalized, the more you think about feminism, and the more you question your relationship to a field that is dominated by male identities. If you are lucky, you profit from a predictably periodic spasm of media interest in "women in music," and you write the appropriate features. Maybe your star crashes with the fortunes of the artists you've come to identify with. Music starts to mean less to you and you pursue other interests, decide to get a real job, devote your time to your family. Five, ten, twenty years later, you're forgotten.

Or maybe the sexual revolution actually takes hold. It's the year of the woman—again—but this time, females are fighting back at many levels: through electoral politics, in boardrooms, through the media, by direct action. A small but strong number of women have worked their way toward the top of the music business, threatening the bastions of power with their proximity. Female artists are no longer accepting tokenization: militant, angry, diverse, they understand the fight for power. You become part of an emerging dialogue that changes not just conceptions of gender, but changes music itself. You love rock 'n' roll more than ever, only it's not rock 'n' roll anymore: It's a new movement, and you're part of it.



Women have been writing about music almost since the birth of rock criticism in the 1960s. In the late sixties and early seventies, Ellen Willis broke critical ground as the pop music writer for *The New Yorker*. Since the early seventies, Lisa Robinson has been rock's premiere style and personality reporter. Throughout the eighties and continuing today, Deborah Frost has shown that women can provide a musician's understanding of rock. In the nineties, Karen Schoemer and Ann Powers have been two of *The New York Times*' youngest critics.

Yet, disregarded by many of the makers of the rock criticism canon, their history is largely hidden. Women critics have only sporadically infiltrated bookshelves stocked with Marcus, Christgau, Marsh, and Frith. Although

Willis's first book is named after a Velvet Underground song ("Beginning to See the Light"), only half of its essays are about music. The only other collection of works by a female critic, Caroline Coon's 1988: *The Punk Rock Explosion*, is no longer in print in the U.S. Gerri Hirshey's *Nowhere to Run*, Julie Burchill's *The Boy Looked at Johnny* (coauthored with Tony Parsons), Gillian Gaar's *She's a Rebel*, Ellen Sander's *Trips*, and Sue Steward and Sheryl Garratt's *Signed, Sealed, & Delivered* are, arguably, the only significant pop music histories written by women (Pamela Des Barres's groupie chronicle *I'm With the Band* may be as important, but it's rarely taken as seriously). Women are sorely underrepresented in many anthologies and histories, accounting for only four of forty-six contributors to the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, five of eighty-one to the *Penguin Book of Rock & Roll Writing*, and no contributors (but one coeditor, Holly George-Warren) to the *Rolling Stone Album Guide*.

You could argue that's changing. A noteworthy number of today's prominent and up-and-coming pop music critics are women: Frost, Schoemer, Powers, Gina Arnold, Arion Berger, Danyel Smith, Ann Marlowe, Joan Morgan, Kim France, Carol Cooper, Terri Sutton, Lorraine Ali, Kristine McKenna, Kim Neely, Christian Wright, Daisann McLane, Daina Darzin, Elena Oumano, Victoria Starr, Elysa Gardner—the list goes on. There are even some women in positions of editorial power: *Rolling Stone* senior editor Karen Johnston, *L.A. Weekly* music editor Sue Cummings, *Village Voice* music editor Ann Powers, *Vibe* editor Danyel Smith, and *Us* executive editor Barbara O'Dair.

But there are no women's names in the editorial masthead of *Musician*, only a handful out of the legions of daily music critics are women, and only 69 of the 1994 Pazz & Jop poll of 309 critics were females (the number was an all-time high, which perhaps partially explains women artists' strong showing in the poll). In 1975, Susin Shapiro wrote an analysis of feminism in rock for *Crawdaddy* that opened with these observations: "The feminist movement in music: this year's lost chord, the most heavily mainlined nonevent of the time. A media dream, feeding those who would bite into the intriguing changes of a Sexual Revolution. . . . Feminism is lip-service, a Stone Age way from the realities of the music business and its subsidiaries—record companies, radio, concert promotion, magazines—where virtually no females rule the roost, just lay eggs. A glance down the mastheads of music mags and company rosters reveals men reveling in headline status while women of the same age, capability, and sensitivity serve time as secretaries and subscription managers—the unsung, unslung heroes."

Has anything changed?



From 1968 to 1975, Ellen Willis was the rock critic for *The New Yorker*. Like her peers Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus, Willis thought that rock 'n' roll was as worthy of serious discourse as literature. Inspired by New Journalism as well as critical theory, her analyses of how musicians shape and reflect culture never seemed academic or dry. Willis saw rock 'n' roll as a metaphor for world events, and criticism as a way of drawing out its poetic subtexts. "It was part of this general larger atmosphere of revolt against authority," she says now from her office at NYU, where she's a journalism professor. "It very much had to do with extending pop culture and mass culture as something that was aesthetically interesting in its own right, and not something that was inherently inferior to so-called high art. It was a polemical kind of writing."

Willis was a vanguard champion of the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, and Jonathan Richman, when they were punks but not "punk." (One of the reasons she left *The New Yorker* was because she and the magazine's musical interests were diverging.) More importantly, Willis saw through the sexual politics of rock 'n' roll in ways that were nothing short of visionary. Her criticism was openly and avidly informed by her gender—she was always aware that listening experiences are shaped by diverse cultural forces. Her awareness of her position as an outsider led her to observations that expressed the changing relations of men, women, and culture.

While it's predominantly been produced and propagated by men, rock 'n' roll has always been consumed by both genders. Many feminist separatists accused female rock fans of misidentification with male ideology, but Willis—grounded equally in criticism, feminism, and rock fandom—articulated the sense of freedom women could get from, say, the Rolling Stones. "I had this filter of feminist analysis through which I saw everything," she explains. "There was the whole question of the paradox of why, despite the music being sexist, I nevertheless felt that it was ultimately liberating for me both as a person and as a woman. There was a very complex set of mediations involved there. It has to do with the idea that a liberating form can transcend its regressive content." In a classic 1977 essay (reprinted in *Beginning to See the Light*), she explained that she preferred the Sex Pistols to "women's music" because ". . . music that boldly and aggressively laid out what the singer wanted, loved, hated—as good rock 'n' roll did—challenged me to do the same, and so, even when the content was antiwoman, antisexual, in a sense antihuman, the form encouraged my strug-

gle for liberation. Similarly, timid music made me feel timid, whatever its ostensible politics.”

Willis was quick, however, to promote women artists who challenged stereotypes and bolted over hurdles. She saw Bette Midler as a camp diva, Janis Joplin as a prefeminist heroine and countercultural tragedy, Ms. Clawdy (a Bay Area singer/songwriter in the seventies) as a future feminist hope. She understood that women listen to music not just for sexual fantasies, but for empowerment. And while they could get power through rock’s form alone, Willis recognized that the ideal was a union of form, vision, and content—a woman singing fiercely about women’s agendas. In part because that ideal still seemed too far away, Willis eventually turned her attention elsewhere, becoming a political/feminist essayist for *Rolling Stone* in the late seventies.



Ellen Willis was one of the first of a school of women who, coming out of the sixties into the seventies, saw rock criticism as a way of putting to work many of the isms of the counterculture: New Journalism, feminism, rockism. “New journalism, rock criticism, alternative press, counterculture peer group reportage, came into being during these years and only the perspective of years to come will tell us what we have here in this curious little nest,” Sander wrote in *Trips*, her history of the sixties, published in 1973. “Right after the heyday of the sixties,” says Carola Dibbell, who was a regular critic for the *Voice* in the late seventies and is now a novelist, “when it seemed like everything was possible, and then this was becoming the seventies, and everything wasn’t possible, and you were figuring, well, what can I do with whatever visions I have—rock criticism was one way to focus very small and write about this supposedly insignificant subject and see everything in it and explore what it meant to avoid the traps of professionalism, the false ideas of objectivity in criticism.”

Rock criticism in the seventies was diverse and often experimental, spurred on by the gonzo journalism practiced at *Crawdaddy* and *Rolling Stone* and by *Creem*’s fevered irreverence. *Creem* in particular was a hotbed of journalistic styles, providing a home for such notables as Dave Marsh, Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs, and Vince Aletti, as well as a number of female critics: Robbie Cruger, Jaan Uhelszki, Georgia Christgau (Robert’s sister), Patti Smith, and Lisa Robinson, among others. In a memoir written in 1994, Uhelszki recalled the sort of passion and predisposition that drew people to *Creem*: “I was a fan of the first order and soon came to realize that just seeing the bands was no longer enough—my fanaticism required

expression. Maybe I needed evidence that I was there. . . . I don't think it was real to me until I wrote about it, and it was always better the second time around."

Cruger and Uhelszki were *Creem's* first two female staffers, and though they both eventually moved from menial positions to editing and writing, they "shared most of the office work, taking the vestiges of sexism for granted," Cruger, *Creem's* first film editor, wrote in 1994. Outside the office as well, they frequently encountered chauvinism while in the line of duty. "These were barbaric times for women music reporters, and often the musicians you were assigned to interview just saw you as a groupie with a tape recorder," Uhelszki notes. Once while on assignment to interview a blue-eyed soul duo, the group's manager offered to send them up to her hotel room for a little "undercover reporting." Uhelszki declined.

She nonetheless managed to get the kind of stories that made *Creem* the most notorious and best loved magazine in rock history. In 1975 she went onstage with Kiss in full makeup and leotard. In a 1976 story on Lynyrd Skynyrd, a somber Ronnie Van Zant told her, "I don't expect to live very long. . . . I have the same problem Janis Joplin did, but worse." Eight months later he died in a plane crash. Uhelszki proved that a woman could get and write a story as well as any man, although she might have to suppress her gender in the process: ". . . some of the best times I ever had were when the band members treated me like one of the boys," she wrote in '94.

Patti Smith is perhaps rock's most famous scribe. Along the way to rock stardom in the seventies, she wrote record reviews and prose fantasies for *Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Crawdaddy*. A true poet, she fucked with form. Her reviews were stream-of-consciousness flows of imagery where she worked out her idolatry of rock 'n' roll. Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was the first rock star, she explained in typically imaginative prose in *Creem*: "a guy with huge piano teeth and a marshall amp installed in his chest."

Smith recast criticism as a creative springboard, rather than an analytic forum, thrusting aside rules of narrative, nomenclature, objectivity, even punctuation. Smith spoke from the inside of rock 'n' roll, she spoke in its tongues, giving its myths her own peculiar, poetic, personalized twists. Sometimes her writing was incredibly naive, believing, rapturous; it was also brave, risky, irreplicable. "Rock n roll is dream soup. whats your brand? mine has turned over. mine is almost at the bottom of the bowl. early arthur lee. smokey robinson. blonde on blonde. its gone. the formula is changed. theres new recipes. new ear drums. rock n roll is being invented.

just like truth. its not for me but its there. its fresh fruit. its dream soup," she wrote in a 1973 paean to Edgar Winter.

Where other women passed as men or celebrated women's viewpoints and interests, Smith wrote as an androgynous but intensely sexual individual who tried to transcend stereotypes, often by speaking about the forbidden. She never denied what was between her legs; indeed, she thrived on lust. "I'm a girl see and my eye zeroes in on boy beauty," she wrote in the Edgar Winter review.

As in her music, Patti Smith created new possibilities for rock writing. Of course, it takes a rare genius to pull off such experimental gambles, and only a few have tried. A number of poets, particularly those influenced by jazz, including Jessica Hagedorn, Ntozake Shange, Jayne Cortez, Hattie Gossett, Dana Bryant, and Tracie Morris, have written similar musical paeans. An intensely imagistic, personal prose turns up in fanzines of the nineties, much of it written by such artists as Bratmobile's Molly Neuman and Allison Wolfe or Bikini Kill's Tobi Vail and Kathleen Hanna. Sonic Youth bassist and occasional critic Kim Gordon was specifically influenced by Smith's criticism. "Whether there are differences or not, you're treated differently, so you might as well take the opportunity to write differently," she says, "and exploit it."



If Willis wrote about rock as culture and Smith wrote about it as myth, Lisa Robinson writes about it as society. Robinson has reported on rock music longer than just about anyone, at *Creem* in the seventies and currently for the *New York Post*. Never exactly a rock critic, Robinson instead interpreted the music using a well-established journalistic form: the gossip column. Her Eleganza reports at *Creem* brought a perspective to the field that in many ways is an antidote to rock criticism's tendency to get hung up in the netherworld of album reviews. "The point about my early stuff is that it was purposely more frivolous than that of the other women who were writing about rock at that time," she says. "To me, rock 'n' roll was fun, sex, liberation, clothes, style, and getting-out-of-the-house freedom. I wrote from a decidedly personal, emotional, biased, gossipy point of view. Uninterested in emulating any of my male peers, I *wanted* it to sound like I was talking to someone over the telephone, the morning after I had experienced something great."

While such writing has rarely gotten the respect accorded news reporting or criticism, it can often be more influential—Robinson has long been a power player as well as a journalist. That's partly because gossip columnists

become insiders. Robinson has been able to bend the ears of rock's established mighty while remaining attuned to new acts. This does not make her merely a step on the hype chain; Robinson can be as judgmental as any crotchety record reviewer. While providing sympathetic ears, gossip columnists are also moral matrons. Thus, in a 1974 *Creem* column, Robinson wrote a touching obituary for Miss Christine, a "graceful courtesan" of rock stars, that was fully feminist as it chastised rockers who would call the former member of the GTO's a groupie: ". . . it was one of the tragedies of Christine's life that certain people defined her life-style in that limited manner. Limited people and limited magazines did that."

Celebrity/gossip journalism of the sort Robinson practices is, admittedly, the kitchen of cultural criticism: a jail within which women can have total freedom. The inveterately macho *Rolling Stone* (in his history of rock's most famous mag, Robert Draper describes how women there were expected to answer the phones and make coffee) confined its few female critics during its early years to these quarters, assigning Eve Babitz to chronicle rock stardom's glamorous daily life, and Robin Green to write about such marginal—and therefore okay to leave in women's hands—rock figures as the Bee Gees, Black Sabbath (too metal for *Stone*), and David Cassidy. Green's work indicates the innovations women can achieve within this window of opportunity; her 1975 article on Cassidy explores the machinery and the human being behind the pop idol. Green also validated the tastes of female teenage fans—no small leap for music criticism. As Lori Twersky and Cheryl Cline have documented in articles written in 1981 and 1986 respectively, journalists have repeatedly caricatured this audience and its interests. "'Silly, Screechy Girls' seems to be the invisible subtitle of many an essay on female rock fans," Cline wrote in her *Bitch* overview of the subject.

Green is not the only woman to veer from that party line. As editor of *Sixteen* magazine in the sixties and seventies, Gloria Stavers broke journalistic ground by writing and editing stories that approached stars from the viewpoint of an adolescent admirer rather than a record collector. Fan club newsletters have long done the same. The most radical achievement in this field of journalism was Pamela Des Barres's 1987 autobiography *I'm With the Band*, in which the celebrated groupie penned beneath-the-sheets revelations of musical personalities. Des Barres lived out the fantasies of many teens, and her book shows she and her colleagues were not the pathetic parasites often portrayed by "limited people and limited magazines." *I'm With the Band* documented the active role groupies played in a rock culture being partially defined by sexual revolution.

Yet while writing about music from such traditional women's positions can rescue those views from silence, it can also reinforce the notion that this is where women belong. For writers who are interested in music in ways not specifically sanctioned for women, the gossip/groupie beat is a ghetto. "Most of the women in rock journalism were little more than glorified gossipers, whether through circumstance or inclination," Patricia Kennealy-Morrison writes in her book *Strange Days: My Life With and Without Jim Morrison*, referring to the late sixties and early seventies. Of course, as the editor of *Jazz & Pop* magazine, she and a handful of other women were the exceptions proving the rule. But, Kennealy-Morrison writes, "there were not all that many women who were given, or who seized for themselves, the freedom to write like men, like *writers*." Tellingly, of the women she lists—Annie (Diane) Fisher of *The Village Voice*, Anne Marie Micklo of *Rock*, Ellen Willis, Ellen Sander, Karin Berg, Deday La Rene, and Alice Polsky—only Willis's is even remotely a household name among rockcrit circles; Sander stayed in the field throughout most of the seventies, but is now another cipher. Ironically, Kennealy-Morrison herself, whose book shows her to be an opinionated and knowledgeable critic, is more known for her relationship with Jim Morrison—with whom she exchanged Wicca wedding vows—than her criticism; although *Strange Days* incorporates some of her old articles, it's primarily Kennealy's account of her time with the Lizard King.



A decade later, Kennealy-Morrison could have listed dozens of female critics in her survey of the field. By the late seventies, women were writing for publications including the *Voice*, *Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker*, *New Musical Express*, *Trouser Press*, and *The Boston Phoenix*. In a 1975 *Voice* article, Robert Christgau described the formation of a rock critic establishment. While the exclusively white-male membership of that club indicated rock criticism was no field of dreams, a number of women still found it to be an alternative to the straight jobs that had been run by men for years. "I'm a rock critic because I'm antiestablishment and because I'm a feminist," says Georgia Christgau, who has written only sporadically since she was laid off from her editing position at *High Fidelity* in 1986. "It attracted me because I thought I could be different and still get published."

From roughly 1975 to 1985 was a Renaissance period of female rock criticism, a time when talents and philosophies flowered. Writers including Daisann McLane, Carola Dibbell, Carol Cooper, Ariel Swartley, Julie Burchill, Caroline Coon, Vivien Goldman, Susan Whitall, Penny Valentine,

Trixie A. Balm, Debra Rae Cohen, Deborah Frost, Gerri Hirshey, Leslie Berman, M. Mark, Karen Durbin, and Jan Hoffman followed in the directions pioneered by Willis, Uhelszki, and Robinson. From there, tastes and styles diverged. Leslie Berman was interested in folk and women's music; Carol Cooper wrote about reggae, funk, and salsa; Vivien Goldman wrote about reggae, punk, and world beat; Carola Dibbell and Julie Burchill were into punk; Deborah Frost was interested in women and musicianship; Karen Durbin liked the Rolling Stones.

Implicitly or explicitly, most of these women were trying to shift criticism's focus and approach without landing in a gender pigeonhole. For many, this meant acknowledging their subjectivity. The harpooning of the great white whale of objectivity was, after all, the goal of New Journalism, and no one was better prepared to do that than women, who had been told all their lives that their views couldn't possibly represent anyone else's. In their hands, rock criticism became not simply a matter of authority (although knowledge had its place), but a forum where opinions were foregrounded. Some men practiced this form of criticism, too, not just in gonzo, macho style (Lester Bangs, Richard Meltzer) but with heart-baring sensitivity (Bangs, Tom Smucker). Still, it has been women's forte. "The way men are men and men are critics is that they're really into the stats," Georgia Christgau says. "They know their rap, they know the facts about the band, they know their discographies, and they know everything everyone else has written about somebody. I think especially the more academic ones have a host of comparisons they can make between artists. I feel like all of that's very male. It's a competitive, aggressive way to look at an individual artist. I never liked reviewing music that way. I consciously try not to compare artists to other artists. I just try to describe what it is that I see and feel and think that the artist is trying to say to me as a member of the audience."

For many of these critics, who had come of age with feminism, gender was a crucial part of the identity from which they viewed the world. Thus when Karen Durbin went on tour with the Rolling Stones for the *Voice*, rather than trying to pretend she was one of the guys, she confronted the fact that she was a feminist on the road with a band often knocked for its misogyny, but whom she loved. After a group interview where a woman journalist was slagged as "one of those high-pressure girl reporters" and Bill Wyman had talked about a song tentatively called "Vagina," Durbin wrote: "Most of the time on the tour, I was just another reporter, neuter, doing my job while everyone else did theirs, but at moments like those, I felt self-consciously female, isolated and engulfed by an all-male world. . . . Of

the half-dozen or so reporters following the tour that week, one was female—me. The result for a woman covering the tour is that you spend almost all your time with men; it's a peculiar, alien sensation, as if you were visiting a planet where the female population had been decimated by an unnamed plague."

Later in the story, Durbin finally interviews Mick Jagger and finds herself almost seduced. "Mick was sitting in the middle of his bed. He was tousled, the bed was tousled, the room was softly lit, and lovely classical music played from a radio by the bed. He looked tired and friendly, like nothing so much as some exotic little animal in its lair, gazing out from soft, blue-shadowed eyes and smiling with lightly painted lips. I felt bewitched, and for a moment, dizzy, lustful half-thoughts collided inside my head." But when Ron Wood enters the room, a serious conversation becomes a glimpse into the boys' club, where girls—including, eventually, Durbin—are treated as just plain silly.

Obviously, women reading a story like this could feel like their experiences were finally being talked about—and men could learn from a perspective different from those of the male reporters on the tour. Other women journalists have used the power of their difference not simply to address that difference, but to write differently, to exploit their advantage as outsiders. Thus, when Deborah Frost wrote a cover story about heavy metal for the *Voice* in 1985, she didn't write in the first person or talk about how Mötley Crüe treated her; she took the tools of subjectivity and empathy into the minds of Nikki Sixx et al., speaking in their voices. This helped her explain the band's escapades, from drunken driving to smashing hotel rooms to boning groupies: "You find these girls that will do just anything to get backstage. They're troupers, man. You've never seen some girls take so much. These girls'll do anything, man. Ask 'em to bark, they'll bark. Where do you find them? You can find them just about anywhere. Arf!"

Frost shows that attempts to exclude women from macho music worlds didn't necessarily work; from Frost to Donna Gaines to Deena Weinstein to Daina Darzin, women have been some of metal's most prominent chroniclers. Women have also often written about types of music ignored by men. In particular, whether it's because it's what they're interested in, because they feel obligated to provide a sympathetic ear, or because male editors think it's what they should do, women often write about women artists. More generally, women tend to write about music more marginal, less "straight," than what white men write about, whether it's by women, blacks, Latinos, gays, or weirdos: After all, men and women aren't necessarily looking for the same role models. Robert Christgau introduced his

'75 white, male rockcrit establishment as an explanation for the rise of Bruce Springsteen. But as his sister Georgia remarks, "I think that men identify with male rock stars, just like women identify with females. . . . I never liked a lot of mainstream artists enough to get in my Bruce Springsteen piece. I think I wrote about him once, and I think he's worth about 750 words, not six long essays a year in both the front and the back of the book."

"There's a notion of what's good that's very male defined," says Swartley. "Because one of the genders has gotten to name what's good more often with more people in more papers, it makes it harder to say, no, we need room for this too." Durbin believes that men have historically focused on music that is more formally and lyrically serious and ignored music that reaches people emotionally. "Criticism has lost touch with the pleasure principle. You wouldn't know it's music to move to," she says. "Rock criticism is more overwhelmingly male than rock itself."



With the exception of Robinson, Uhelszki, and Frost, most of the women who wrote in the sixties and seventies have all but quit rock criticism; some write maybe one review a year. Their reasons for leaving are as diverse as their subsequent pursuits (academia, punk rock, law, family), but they sound a similar tone: As women get older, they become less interested in the music. "We grew out of it," says Durbin.

Of course, that means either the male rock critics who stuck with it are stunted adolescents (a charge some current and former critics specifically level), or they found something in music that grew with them. Or women were shut out of the field in ways that were so subtle, they've rationalized them away. Or all of the above.

Many women were victims of the professionalization of rock criticism in the eighties, when *Rolling Stone* purged many of its quirkiest writers and rock criticism went mainstream. "The business became increasingly important and straight journalism caught on, so there began to be rock critics at the daily papers," Robert Christgau says. "It became a profession that people thought they could do. It was, inevitably, professionalized, and the room for that amateur fannishness diminished."

Of course, many people considered amateur fannishness precisely rock criticism's forte. Not surprisingly, as rock criticism entered the straight world, it reflected all the old hang-ups of that world—including sexism. Few women were hired for those daily jobs, and with the exception of *Creem* editor Susan Whitall and *Rolling Stone* editors Marianne Partridge,

Sarah Lazin, and Harriet Fier, they continued to be excluded from editing positions. In the days when lots of people were free-lance critics and it was a relatively easy way to be a bohemian—and when men like Christgau, then the *Voice's* music editor, were open to women's voices—it didn't seem so important that women didn't hold the power. But in the eighties, women found themselves struggling against a hostile economic environment, looking up through the glass ceiling at the ex-peers who were now their bosses, realizing they were reaching the age when they wanted a family, and hauling ass out of there. "The only reason that those of us who stopped doing criticism may feel bitter or uncomfortable about it has something to do with the fact that men had a different way of stopping," says Leslie Berman, who is now studying law. "They were able to stop and recognize it as a choice, as a career move. I stopped writing about rock 'n' roll because it paid shit."

Plenty of men stopped writing about rock 'n' roll because it paid shit, but they never had to suffer the overt sexism that makes being financially unstable more difficult for women than men. One critic recalls that when a colleague and friend of hers became music editor at a magazine, she called him up and he asked, "So now will you sleep with me?" Others describe being stuck in entry-level positions at music publications while less qualified men passed them by, or being shoved off into "women's sections" of the company. One journalist was told by a prospective employer, "We're starting a magazine and you're starting a family, and it just doesn't seem like a good match." Another was hired by a large daily that required her to wear pantyhose, then abruptly fired her when a white male crony of the editor's was handed the job. I was once apologetically told by an editor at a music magazine that there was an unspoken rule that women were not to be hired or used as free-lancers.

At at least one music magazine, the sexual harassment has been so serious that one woman has prepared discrimination charges against its editor/publisher. In a 1994 article in the *New York Observer*, Carleen Hahn reported that a former employee was filing a Title 7 complaint against *Spin's* Bob Guccione, Jr.—and that she was not the first woman at the magazine to be harassed. Former male and female *Spin* employees described to Hahn the sexist atmosphere fostered by Guccione junior, the son of the *Penthouse* publisher.

Again and again, from Patricia Kennealy to Karen Durbin to Deborah Frost to Gina Arnold, women refer to rock criticism as a boys' club. If you follow certain rules—if you act like one of the boys, if you date one of the boys—you'll be granted admittance; if you break the rules, you'll be kicked out. "The only way that any one of us, if we really wanted to maintain a

place in that crowd, would be able to do so would be to be sleeping with some guy in the crowd, or to have some guy in the crowd want to sleep with you," says Berman. "You have to either be in the locker room or you have to be somebody that everybody in the locker room wants to be hanging around with."

Several women use the "locker room" analogy to describe the fraternity of rock critics as well as the atmosphere surrounding rock stars—particularly the backstage area, where, if you're a woman, it's assumed that you're a groupie. Many say they became critics partially to escape that stereotype. "In the backstage milieu of concert settings, where a lot of us spent our early journalistic moments, the guys always have a lot to do, and there's a lot of girls who are just hanging around," says *Village Voice* editor Ann Powers. "There's this desperate feeling of not wanting to just hang around." Many rock critics identify with Lisa Olson, the Boston sports-writer who fought for admission to sports locker rooms. "You're put in a lot of situations that are really demeaning, as a woman, which you've got to emerge from with some kind of dignity," says Frost. "You're getting it from the bands, you're getting it from the editors, the other people you work for. Which men don't have to deal with. . . . There's really a sexual aspect to it, and to say that there isn't is to totally deny the truth. . . . It's something that's very ingrained in this whole boys' club atmosphere of rock criticism."

A happy number of women have left rock criticism for bigger, better, or at least equally worthy pursuits. Willis writes a media column at the *Voice* and teaches journalism at NYU. Durbin is editor of the *Voice*. Caroline Coon is a painter. Dibbell writes novels. Swartley is a free-lance magazine writer. Julie Burchill is a best-selling novelist in England. Daisann McLane, who was a main pop and rock critic for *Rolling Stone* for three years, writes about Caribbean music for the *Voice* and *New York Times*. Jan Hoffman is a reporter for the *Times*, Janet Maslin a film critic there. Patti Smith is, well, Patti Smith.

Yet there's a sense of something missing without these women's voices engaging in the rockcrit dialogue. Maybe as their original countercultural objectives faded and rock fragmented, they really did lose interest in the music. "I got tired of it," Willis says. "I wanted to move on to other things. It stopped being compelling to me as a central metaphor for all the different issues I wanted to write about." Or maybe they weren't allowed to write about the types of music they wanted to, in the way they wanted to. Maybe the field and the music became more conservative together, and women were sent a subtle message to get back into the kitchen. The Reagan-Bush years did take a heavy toll on women critics. "It doesn't have anything to do

with my life," Swartley says about current pop music. "It doesn't talk about kids. It doesn't talk about long-term relationships. I don't think there's any pop music directed at the peculiar class of anger women my age that I know feel."

Swartley believes that some men are able to continue writing about rock because they respond to it formally, while she responds emotionally. But, as *L.A. Weekly's* Sue Cummings points out, that's a typical Western-constructed dualism. And it's a reinforcement of the myth that women can't think abstractly. Yes, many women wear their emotions on their sleeves when they write, but that doesn't mean they're not responding to the form of the music. Telling women that their views are too emotional is a way of belittling their opinions and, ultimately, silencing them. "As far as criticism itself, it's extremely threatening to me," Dibbell says. "I believe that it has a lot to do with the fact that I'm a woman and that I was not specifically encouraged to throw my weight around verbally. For me to try to get myself to go through the personality restructuring that would have been required for me to really be a critic would be like giving up what I valued about myself."

Dibbell stopped writing partially because of harsh responses to her criticism. Certainly, a critic has to be able to take what they dish out. Hate mail is commonplace, but men get it too. Yet some reactions to female critics are unusually angry and even violent, motivated more by misogyny than ruffled feathers. In a 1987 incident in San Jose reported in *Bitch* magazine, a singer for the band Daddy in His Deep Sleep brought an inflatable sex doll onstage, told the audience it represented a critic who had made an offhand, slighting remark about his band in a review, and assaulted it onstage. TV show host Dee Barnes was beaten up and thrown down a stairway by rapper Dr. Dre when she aired an interview in which Ice Cube said derogatory things about his former N.W.A. bandmate. In a society that has long sanctioned violence against women, it's sad but not surprising that some men respond to the verbal threat presented by female critics with physical violence.



Fortunately, women are speaking up regardless. A new generation of females has risen to the forefront of the rockcrit ranks. Many of them worked on the fringes of publishing and the music world in the late eighties, writing about punk rock and its descendants for alternative newspapers or DJ'ing at college radio stations. Others have been inspired by rap to put their opinions in writing. In a sense women—like many cultural freedom

fighters—went underground in the eighties, refueling and finding a new sense of independence.

The most important underground music publication of the Reagan-Bush era was *Bitch*. From 1985 to 1989, “The Women’s Rock Mag with Bite” filled the considerable gaps left by mainstream journalism with articles about female artists and essays that challenged conventional constructions of sex and rock. “Why *Bitch*? Because lots of what gets written about women in rock is ALL THE SAME,” declared editor/publisher Lori Twersky in the debut issue. With a team of writers including Cheryl Cline, S. J. McCarthy, Danise Rodriguez, and William V. Abbott IV, *Bitch* ran stories on historical female figures who have somehow been left out of most of the histories, and on new musicians coming up. *Bitch* writers attacked both knee-jerk sexism and feminism, defending female fans without mythologizing them, looking for historical precedents for heavy metal’s misogyny.

During its time, *Bitch* didn’t dent the rockcrit canon—although it did take it on. In one particularly feisty essay, Twersky attacked critical stereotypes of girls and cars: “American male Rock critics REALLY burn me when they add to this Girl And Car stuff the standard yapping about certain songs sung by women (but not necessarily written by them) being celebrations of female innocence and puppy love, yada yada, which is a message: it says that female feelings are, beyond anything else, DUMB feelings, adorable in their stupidity, and there is something not innocent, authentic, nor likable about female feelings more clearly articulated than ‘Da Doo Ron Ron.’” *Bitch*’s contributors weren’t afraid to assert their opinions; their name preempted the usual vitriolic responses. Distributed by mail order and in the fanzine network, *Bitch* primarily reached other women and supportive men. But many of those readers were inspired to start their own bands and/or ’zines; Tobi Vail of the band Bikini Kill and ’zine *Jigsaw*, for example, was a *Bitch* fan. When editor Twersky died in November 1991 of complications from an autoimmune condition, *Bitch* stopped publishing, but it had already planted the seeds of Revolution Girl Style.

The nineties find women strengthening and taking in new directions the advances made by critics before them. Often, they’re doing so unaware of the precedents they’re following. “Now I have female peers, but I never had female role models,” Gina Arnold says. A number of critics—Powers, Arnold, Danyel Smith, Terri Sutton, Sue Cummings, Gillian Gaar—honed their voices as columnists for alternative weeklies, where they’re given the freedom to be personal and political. “I feel very dedicated to being a feminist in my writing,” says Powers, who was a columnist for *SF Weekly* for four years and who continues in Willis’s tradition, dissecting music

using the tools of crit theory and infusing her analysis with poetic prose and personal anecdotes. "There's been a lot of opportunities for women in the rock world, but there's also a lot of misogyny. So it's important for me to be explicitly political, without being a total lefty, writing in a way that does address women's issues and women's consciousness."

Many women have moved away from writing about music claimed by men. "At the *Weekly*, there's so many guys with a proprietary interest in rock, I don't even see myself as a rock writer," *L.A. Weekly* music editor Cummings says. "My big obsession is house and techno." In a 1990 column for Minneapolis's *City Pages*, Sutton worried that critics don't dance: "People freakin' about Hammer's shallow talent pool are missing the point. The four million owners of *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* aren't sitting around the living room, witless on pot, dissecting obscure lyrics and musical antecedents—they're dancing."

Karen Schoemer, who has written for numerous publications and is now the music critic at *Newsweek*, says that as a straight woman, she can appreciate the appeal of artists straight men can't. "There are a lot of mainstream bands that don't get any recognition [from critics] because the male singer is sexy," she says. "I'm not saying Jon Bon Jovi is a major talent by any means, but he's never ever going to be taken seriously in mainstream rock criticism because he's got a legion of girl fans. And a lot of male critics automatically take that as saying that a band is not serious."

The teen magazine *Sassy* definitely takes girl fans seriously; moving Gloria Stavers's tradition one step farther, it even speaks in their voice. In the late eighties and early nineties, *Sassy* writer and editor Christina Kelly and such contributors as Kim France and Erin Smith used teen lingo to discuss music and profile artists. Their "cute band alert" not only celebrates girls' tastes, it's been a successful indicator of future stardom. Kurt Cobain, Courtney Love, Evan Dando, and Juliana Hatfield graced *Sassy* covers before any other mainstream magazine picked up on them. *Sassy* has changed the face of magazine publishing by speaking frankly to girls about issues that teen magazines have long skirted. Not surprisingly, it was the first national publication to write about the loose network of fanzines and bands that has become known as Riot Grrrl. (In late 1994 *Sassy* was sold and its editorial style revamped.)

Fanzines, long a stronghold of nerdy white boys with big egos and big mouths, are the latest front in the rockcrit battle. From *Bikini Kill*, to glossier, female-led publications like *B-Side* and *Ben Is Dead*, to Lisa Carver's *Rollerderby*, 'zines have become outlets and forums for women in the wake of *Bitch*. Carver writes like a Patti Smith of the nineties, libidiniz-

ing her musical appreciation, creating and commenting all at once. Her insider status (she doubles as performance artist Lisa Suckdog) gives her a sympathetic ear, and she can get into indie boys' and girls' minds like no one else.

Riot Grrrls take Willis's polemical kind of writing to its punk extreme. "Because we girls want to create media that speak to US. We are tired of boy band after boy band, boy 'zine after boy 'zine, boy punk after boy punk after boy," reads a manifesto in *Fantastic Fanzine*. Riot Grrrl 'zines often explore intensely personal terrain, including incest and rape. The Xeroxed pages can read like poems desperately scribbled in a diary by someone locked in a bunker, her words her final resistance. Private acts made political through sharing, 'zines are not aimed at a mass audience. Accordingly, when the media leapt upon Riot Grrrl as a new trend in 1992, Riot Grrrls leapt back in fright, and recriminations have flown back and forth ever since.

The most promising new pop music critics are the women who write about hip-hop. Like writers inspired by punk a decade earlier, rap critics channel the energy of a musical explosion into their writing. Danyl Smith, dream hampton, Ann Marlowe, Joan Morgan, Amy Linden, and Gwen Meno all write powerful prose that highlights personal and political responses to music. Poets like Tracie Morris, Dana Bryant, and 99 have also been influenced by rap and chronicle their relationships to it. Most of these writers address hip-hop's fabled misogyny head-on, defending their love of Ice Cube or Dr. Dre in the same way Ellen Willis and Karen Durbin defended the Rolling Stones.

Black writers add a cultural justification to their arguments: Even while they criticize expressions of African-American experience, they won't let those expressions, and thereby their experience, be dismissed. Like many women before them, they find themselves caught between feminism and black pride, and they're forging new articulations of that position. "Because I love rap music, its cadences, intonations, and mood swings, I've recognized and struggled to reconcile the genius and passion of my brothers—even when it meant betraying my most fundamental politics," hampton wrote in *Essence* in 1994. Hip-hop may harbor a lot of chauvinism, but with the exception of Carol Cooper, along with occasional articles by Jamaica Kincaid (who cut her teeth writing criticism for the *Voice* in the seventies), Thulani Davis, Lisa Jones, and Lisa Kennedy, there was no body of pop music criticism by black women until rap came along.

Now, they're the next chapter in an unfolding history. There's a straight but rarely traced line from Ellen Willis to Patti Smith to Georgia Christgau

to Danyel Smith. When Leslie Berman discusses the field she's basically left behind, she could be reading from a Riot Grrrl tract. "I'm a pretty serious feminist," Berman says. "And a part of me says, We'll fight them on the beaches, and we'll make them give in and see that we're right, and they'll march shoulder to shoulder with us and we'll be equal. And part of me says, Fuck them, we'll have our own revolution."