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Writing about music is writing first

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Abstract

By focusing on brief examples from four writers – journalists Anthony DeCurtis and Lester Bangs, academics Sheila Whiteley and Susan McClary – this piece is designed to inspire and/or shame readers into paying closer attention to how they use language when they describe or analyse music. An effort was made to keep the tone of the critiques informal and conversational, thus approximating the mood of the kind of session the author has found effective in more than thirty years of editing at The Village Voice*, and many years of teaching writing to ambitious undergraduates as well as a class full of journalism grad students. In such sessions, the intention is always to better enable the writer to say what he or she wants to say as convincingly as possible. If ideas are called into question, that is because the editor believes them to be overly familiar, inconsistent, or already discarded by the writer's audience. What is at issue is the writing, not the writer. This is not to deny, unfortunately, that sometimes hurt feelings ensue.*

It should be added that the references to magic initially addressed the conference theme 'This Magic Moment'. Given the essay's nuts-and-bolts attitude, however, they retain a more general relevance.

One of the many foolish things about the fools who compare writing about music to dancing about architecture is that dancing usually is about architecture. When bodies move in relation to a designed space, be it stage or ballroom or living room or gymnasium or agora or Congo Square, they comment on that space whether they mean to or not. The comment is usually oblique, absorbed below normal levels of ratiocination. And it can make itself felt that way, subliminally inflecting the meanings of dwellings, edifices, and meeting places. But if we want to understand it more fully, we'd best reduce it to words.

And why is that? It's because writing about dancing about architecture is less oblique than dancing about architecture *per se*. And so is writing about music. Sure, music's moments present themselves as magical. Preparing my second collection, I did a check on the word 'magic', and for good reason; even now, after judicious pruning, it plays a meaningful descriptive or analytic role in ten of the seventy-two essays in *Grown Up All Wrong*. Why was I, are we, thrown back on this mystification? We know the reasons by now. Music is the most evanescent of the arts – invisible in a visual culture, gone in an instant. Musicologists note that few of the listeners who intuit its formal logic enjoy a full theoretical command of its harmonic syntax – and might add, though not often, that its rhythmic syntax is comprehended by fewer, almost none of whom have also mastered harmony. It's no mystification to observe that even its syntacticians are seldom so arrogant as to claim they can enumerate its effects on the emotions. All of which is to adduce only formal qualities when historical, cultural, social, and psychological associations render it incalculably more

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complex. And something grander still subsumes these sane specificities. It's that all art is magic – and that as we've been told *ad infinitum* from Saussure on down, nothing can be reduced to words, not even words. Writing about writing is also like dancing about architecture.

As someone who felt writing as a calling well before he chose music as a subject, I believe I have a distinct way of surrounding, approximating, analysing, and evoking music's magic in words – to use a suspiciously dated term, a style. I believe every good writer has a style, even if the writer disavows the very notion, as long as it's understood that the only way to define style is broadly. In decades of book reviewing, teaching, and especially editing, I've prided myself on an open-minded commitment to the writer's voice, finding good style in critics as plain as Tom Johnson and as rococo as Stanley Crouch, as literary as Jamaica Kincaid and as academic as Raymond Williams. Concomitantly, I'm scornful of slack grammar, ramshackle exposition, unclear referents, vague verbs, Latinate desiccation, basic-English condescension, clichés, and anything else that turns prose soft, witless or dull. And I'm hostile to two countervailing tendencies that lurked in the back of my mind when I proposed this presentation: in academia, the theory-driven disdain for so-called belletrism, and in journalism, the priggish and/or hard-boiled drive to expunge colour, pretension, and all their putatively reader-unfriendly relatives from the public prints.

The hard-boiled variant those few of you with daily newspaper experience will recognise as a special passion of deskmen who believe all arts writers should spend six months on the police beat – which I did, and look where it got me. A few years ago, Elmore Leonard circulated a 1,170–word list of eleven rules to help writers remain invisible. 'Avoid prologues', he said; 'Never use a word other than 'said' to carry dialogue', he advised; 'If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it', he concluded. But in a prologue-like introductory graf, Leonard qualified these dicta: 'If you have a facility for language and imagery and the sound of your voice pleases you, invisibility is not what you are after, and you can skip the rules. Still, you might look them over' (Leonard 2001, p. 1). Anyone who's admired *Maximum Bob* or *Get Shorty* knows that voice – it's Leonard's, terse and colloquial and sly, yet faithful to the subject at hand, hence the uncharacteristic 'facility for language and imagery' (only isn't it 'facility with', or 'faculty for'?). It works for detective fiction, especially if you're not Raymond Chandler, and police reporting too. But that's not why it made the *New York Times*, or why it was mailed out by the managing editor of a national magazine shortly before he relegated the rock criticism beat to various copy editors. And now, enter the prigs.

> Like many a second-rate poet – or musician, for that matter – who died young, Bangs has become something of a cult figure. His following, however, is limited to the set of music writers who admire his gonzo style – a Beat-derived spew of words that aims for Kerouac and occasionally rises to the level of the execrable Charles Bukowski. It's insultingly indulgent, the kind of adolescent self-aggrandisement – now widely influential in music publications – that makes it impossible for literate human beings to take rock criticism at all seriously. (DeCurtis 2000)

As writing, 'Busting the cult of Lester Bangs' has some jam – within limits, rage often enlivens rhetoric. Here I'd delete the 'of words' – no one thinks the style is sartorial – and also the 'at all' at the end, which Anthony DeCurtis wants for the soupçon of elegance it adds to epithets he fears are too Bangsian, even though only two are remotely gonzo or even Anglo-Saxon, including 'gonzo' itself. But in general the expression is strong. What's objectionable is the ideas expressed. A, they're not accurate. Unless all rock-critical slang and autobiography trace to the vernacular

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motherlode Bangs discovered while kicking around his Southern Californian nowhere as a restlessly hyperintelligent teenager, which they verifiably do not, Bangs is widely influential spiritually, not stylistically. Nobody writes like him; the 'pallid imitators and dismissible hacks' who kick off DeCurtis's next graf are not apparent in the 'music publications' DeCurtis doesn't name either. And B, too bad Bangs doesn't have more stylistic acolytes. Few writers worth reading imitate anyone. But we could use more who emulate his rushes of insight, his descriptive specifics and imagistic potshots, his tone that could turn serious as solipsism from funnier than *Spinal Tap* in the space of three sentences.

> 'Let's Spend the Night Together' also represented the apotheosis of noise evolved into an arrangement of perfect clarity and unorthodox form, an effortlessly pushing, pulsating, almost mechanical sound that could go on forever. (Bangs 1974, p. 50)

> . . . like that bass whomp that Charlie gives the opening of that damn latest single which like the bricks smashing together in the second chorus of 'Hip Shake' proves he's still the greatest drummer in rock because the most subtle. This album is false. Numb. But it cuts like a dull blade. Are they doing the cutting, or are we? What do we want to kill? It's already died, enjoy the Rolling Stones while they move like waxen athletes through our community stating their perfect pall and putting it all into place for one moment since time don't wait and rock 'n' roll is only a moment while we wait for the next presence to assert itself. And honey, I ain't talkin' about no stars. (Bangs 2002A, p. 159)

> But and then at that time also, I recall with my old bud Mick, swam out scenes a good drifter cannabisalt off the boardwalk entirely, and we listened a tune or time or two, and to conclusion we did come, most specifically that this here makes hay jump and spindly-leg jeckyl hustle because it's funny and good as gone can be – 'Hot Stuuff' – when Mick comes on with that jive Rasta growly blab and actually nerves up to 'Allayoupeapalinnyaksitay, I know yall goin' broke, to everybody in Jamaica, livin' workin' in the sun, yer hot stuff', yeah, hot hicks wack on down, let those Jaymochan rude boys get their mitts on your gullet dad, they'll squeeze till you forget about tryina be anybody's badass, but slopfingered wimp as you are you're all right. (Bangs 2002B, p. 163)

Lester Bangs loved the Rolling Stones so much that they cowed him even when they failed him, and the Stones pieces are the most ordinary in his second collection, *Mainlines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste*. But I wanted to compare Bangs and DeCurtis on the same subject, which, since Bangs died at around the time DeCurtis began publishing, limited my options, and ordinary Bangs ain't bad. The first selection, which would be improved markedly by preceding 'effortlessly' with 'of' rather than 'an', should be read in historical context: general though the musical description is, it's on the money, especially rhythmwise, and for its time detailed and astute. Two years later, in his first *Voice* assignment, the observations are sharper and the kudos to Watts a truism waiting to happen – good for Bangs for getting there early, and bad for his editor, me, for not suggesting that 'the greatest' become 'best' and 'most subtle' become 'subtlest'. But the conclusion just below, where I should have gotten him to change one of the 'waits' at the end, is what Bangs is famous for, and though its disillusionment became a reflex, its passion is what prigs can't stand. It's pretentious because it insists rock and roll is a matter of life and death, and some will find that insistence wrongheaded, especially as regards these candidates for Madame Tussaud's. But without writing like Lester's, mystifying grandly beneath a protective layer of cynicism, we'd be hard-pressed to relive a magic moment that in his metaphor equals the entire lifespan of rock and roll – although in fact rock and roll will survive his disillusionment, albeit on a smaller scale. His words reach across the decades to make what's been lost realer even to those who don't believe it was there.

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So one more thing. Just glance at our last Bangs bit, one long, unedited, flawed, Kerouac-meets-Robin-Williams sentence bought by a magazine that was bought by teenagers all across America in 1976. Now tell me again how nothing has been lost.

> It is the perfect riff: tough, dramatic, and instantaneous in its impact – the rock & roll equivalent of the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth. (DeCurtis 1998A, p. 9)

> With its defiant lyrics about sexual frustration and the vapidity of consumer culture, 'Satisfaction' sharpened the Stones' rebellious image and articulated the anger of the youth culture that was just beginning to take shape. (DeCurtis 1998A, p. 10)

> Raw, dense, uncontrolled, and feverish in its rhythmic momentum, *Exile on Main Street* is the only studio double album the Stones have ever made, and it's devastating to listen to from start to finish. . . . (DeCurtis 1998B, p. 11)

> The Stones persisted in their love of blues by covering Slim Harpo's 'Shake Your Hips' and Robert Johnson's 'Stop Breaking Down' . . . (DeCurtis 1998B, p. 12)

> . . . the Stones were perched swaggeringly on the cusp of the two decades. Beggars at the banquet on one end, exiles on Main Street on the other, the Stones faced down the cultural dislocation that shattered so many of their contemporaries, and it made their day. (DeCurtis 1998B, p. 13)

I've been fair here. Nestled near the anecdotes and star quotes DeCurtis's soft-boiled employers require, these selections represent the best critical writing in the Rolling Stones pieces he chose to preserve in his collection, *Rocking My Life Away*, balanced by a few exemplary solecisms. Despite the 'studio double album' poking out of the *Exile* sentence, the first samples from each review have plenty of sock – but note their similarity of method and tone to the first two sentences by the supposedly self-indulgent Bangs, which I slightly prefer. The reason for that preference is suggested by the second selection from each DeCurtis review I've quoted: the flat banality of every idea and expression in the 'Satisfaction', the clumsy walk across the hall from artist name to song ID in the *Exile on Main Street*. And the finale is the clincher. Right before a wham-bam closer perches 'perched swaggeringly on the cusp', which is terrible. Here's a tip – stuck with one of those 'ingly' adverbs, see if it works as a verb; since perch implies stillness and swagger implies movement, 'swagger on the cusp' is at least an improvement. But then examine what follows with care. Sounds neat, but whose banquet was *Beggars Banquet*, actually? Wasn't it a rock stars' do for the salt of the earth? And by the way, how exactly does dislocation shatter? Is that a mixed metaphor about bones?

Lest you think I'm niggling or carrying a grudge, let me note that there's first-rate writing in *Rocking My Life Away* – U2, *Lipstick Traces*, the hidden injuries of a working-class background I recognise from experience, a sly Artist of the Year piece on the Stones from 1989 that ignores their music and makes them look like utter shits. But in his introduction, the Bangs-killer is proud to identify himself as 'belletristic', and that's a high standard. Although I suspect Bangs thought more about the Beats and Richard Meltzer, he wrote like rock and roll. He believed it was OK to make mistakes because in rock and roll mistakes are often beautiful. Better barbarisms like 'a good drifter cannabisalt off the boardwalk entirely' than gaucheries like 'perched swaggeringly on the cusp', and the right rock writing sometimes gets away with gaucheries like '*that* bass whomp *that* Charlie gives the opening of *that* damn latest single' (italics mine, natch). DeCurtis is stern about the notion of rock and roll prose. He claims it 'typically provides the rationale for ridiculous adolescent excesses, creating a genre characterised by what Stephen Holden has described as ''smart teen

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talk'' ' (DeCurtis 1998c, p. xi). But if what he aspires to instead is, let us say, intelligent adult discourse, then his technical command and eloquence density had better approach that of Virginia Woolf, Lionel Trilling, Terry Eagleton. And it doesn't come close.

> [T]he characteristic sensual astringency of Jagger's vocal predominates. Indolent with sexual innuendo, and accompanied by a guitar slide which ranges from a throb suggestive of arterial blood to a quivering scream, the final verse links 'my' little red rooster to the penis itself. (Whiteley 1997, p. 70)

> Rather than open our minds, we are invited to close our eyes, to feed our heads. As such, there is the implication of an anti-intellectual response which draws on the imagery of the verse and the promise of expanded metaphysical experience. (Whiteley 1997, p. 79)

> In the Manson murders there was chaos, a commission of violence, rape, and murder ideologically fused with a vision of occult sensuality. With Jagger, a similar position emerges. (Whiteley 1997, p. 84)

> At Altamont, the hooliganism associated with many of the Stones' earlier concerts became a massive certainty when LSD was tied to orgiastic exhibitionism. (Whiteley 1997, p. 84)

DeCurtis, who often operates on the fringes of the university, claims belletrism against the academic fashion for theory, jargon, and what Judith Butler has called the 'values of difficulty'. Inconveniently for me, this is not a fashion of any evident interest to the only contemporary scholar I could find who has dealt at length with the Rolling Stones. This lacuna is not my subject here, but maybe it should be somebody else's; in any case, the essay I located proved telling enough. Probably because she's English, Sheila Whiteley's credentials were unknown to me – IASPM officer with a big grant to study sexism in the culture industry, and the editor of the collection where 'Little Red Rooster v. the Honky Tonk Woman' appeared. But especially in academia, prominence is no guarantee of verbal felicity.

The essay shows a healthy indifference to the constraints of academic rigour, risking close readings, broad generalisations, journalistic sources, and pop sociology to explore a thesis worthy of argument even if it's less original than she pretends: that Mick Jagger's famous sexism was undercut by his famous androgyny, just as common sense might suggest, and that his relationship to 1960s ideals was more complex and conflicted than cynical accounts of his cynicism allow. And surprisingly, early on she not only describes the Stones as if there were five of them but comes up with non-technical musical analyses that top DeCurtis's. My favourite is halfway to an elegance that DeCurtis approaches only in his 'Satisfaction' lead. Let me requote: '[T]he characteristic sensual astringency of Jagger's vocal predominates. Indolent with sexual innuendo, and accompanied by a guitar slide which ranges from a throb suggestive of arterial blood to a quivering scream, the final verse links ''my'' little red rooster to the penis itself'.

'Astringency', sharp; 'arterial blood', colourful; 'indolent with innuendo', classy. But already language is going awry. Whiteley hobbles 'indolent with innuendo' by throwing an extra 'sexual' in the middle of it, spattering mud on the apt 'sensual astringency' in the process. Then there's 'suggestive of' where little old 'like' would do, the 'which' where a 'that' belongs, and, worst of all, the decision to hogtie the bold suggestion that Jagger's little red rooster is actually his giant *weisswurst* with the all-purpose verb 'links', the insecure quotation marks around 'my', the 'the' itself. How about instead: 'the final verse turns Jagger's little red rooster into his own penis' (or even, should the taste police avert their eyes, 'his own cock')? And soon Whiteley

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shows herself to be the careless academic writer I feared. She unmoors sentence upon sentence with an opening 'There is', inserts apostrophes into 'Rocks Off', *Goats Head Soup*, and *It's Only Rock 'n Roll*, cites Pa Stapler and his Stapler Singers. She also uses the unfootnoted phrase 'well publicised commitment to sex, dope and lavish autonomy', which rang a bell. So I Googled 'lavish autonomy', yielding only one result. It's at robertchristgau.com: 'But their most passionate commitments were to sex, dope, and lavish autonomy'.

If you want to write like Judith Butler, please change your mind, but that's not my subject here either, I guess. Whiteley's cross-disciplinary anti-rigour is a more relevant model in the EMP context, and leaves her worse off than DeCurtis. The best way to fake rigour out is with style, the best way to bring theses off is with flair, and the brute fact is that any working journalist of moderate distinction commands more of both than most well-meaning academics. So let's check out a few brief, bad passages, not to mock Whiteley – that really isn't my idea of fun – but for the educational purpose of articulating what's wrong with them. I mentioned unclear referents, and the ramshackle exposition of the first and second examples permits doozies: slack 'As such' compounded by unmoored 'there is the implication of' in the first, and 'similar position' in the second – really, what 'position' does Whiteley believe the Manson sentence implies? In the third example, the vague verbs 'associated with' and 'tied to' (remember our friend 'links'?) cut the stumps out from under the crippled 'became a massive certainty'. I sincerely hope all the academics reading this are beyond this sort of thing, and I sincerely doubt it. Please, try to get there.

> One of the first things that strikes the ears in 'Cross Road' is the peculiar, almost throttled intensity of both guitar and vocal sounds. Although Johnson recorded several very erotic, seductive, slow-hand blues, his posthumous fame rests with these rather more tortured numbers. (McClary 2000, p. 51)

> And the model of Johnson's organising riffs became indispensable to Cream's modus operandi. But the band replaces Johnson's eerie, strangulated riff with one that boasts a driving, propulsive beat and an insistent aeolian seventh-degree that announced their refusal of pop-oriented tonality. (McClary 2000, p. 57)

> Their presentation of the blues pattern is absolutely regular, like the Chicago blues bands rather than Johnson. This is in part because of the presence of an ensemble and also because of the way blues practices had solidified by that time. (McClary 2000, p. 57)

> Not too surprisingly, Cream has 'hardened' the blues; those elements that signified the body in its vulnerability (whether in vocals, cross-rhythms, or timbral shadings) are exchanged for a driving beat, a narrative trajectory in the music, and the display of alienated Romantic virtuosity. (McClary 2000, p. 58)

A model as inspirational as Bangs is Susan McClary, who may even qualify as one of the 'celebrity theoreticians' a Goucher College website accuses of clandestine belletrism. Before we examine a few passages, let me recommend a longer demonstration of her method in *Conventional Wisdom*, the bravura harmonic-rhythmic-timbral breakdown of Prince's 'Kiss'. In 'Thinking Blues', McClary goes easier on the musicology, and thus offers a clearer comparison. Just because she's argued so forcefully that pop music benefits from detailed harmonic analysis, how much she savours the imprecise and impressionistic marks her as a total writer, and to my ear 'peculiar, almost throttled intensity' is as evocative as any phrase we've encountered. McClary writes well. But note that in the first selection she trips over 'very', which as it stands unintentionally modifies 'slowhand' – dropping the 'seductive' and both commas would be one fix, making it 'very erotic, very seductive' and deleting the

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'slowhand' comma another, or she could just can the intensive altogether. Also, the polite 'these rather more tortured numbers' creates a tonal distance from her material I consider counterproductive, although, as an academic, McClary may well be aiming for it. This happens again in the second with 'modus operandi' as well as 'aeolian seventh-degree', which could stand explication in a 'by' clause right afterwards. The third selection indulges a rare vagueness; 'because of the presence of an ensemble' is no substitute for specifying what an ensemble does. The sentence cries out for a good verb.

The fourth example, on the other hand, works completely. The quotations marks around 'hardened' are no tic, because they remind us of Cream's role in 'hard rock'. The unorthodox idea of music signifying bodily vulnerability is shored up with examples that make sense even if we don't concur. 'Driving beat' is a locution McClary should keep an eye on, we saw it once already, and I'd prefer a non-'ing' adjective anyway, but I like the way the brief, received phrase gets us to the more controversial notion of narrative trajectory – a McClary theme – which in turn leads to the grand, undeniable notion that Eric Clapton imposed art-school ideology on the blues that supposedly humbled him so. All in fifty words or less.

I've limited myself to four writers who divide up too schematically, with extremists faring better than fence-sitters. Don't take that coincidence as prescriptive – I identify with fence-sitters myself. Don't take my rhetorical approach as prescriptive either – your voice does have to be your own. But that doesn't leave you free to ignore the mechanics of a craft whose guild automatically enrols anyone who communicates in written words. If my rhetoric here has approximated the casual tone of my in-person editing, that's in part to emphasise that the craft is best learned the way most rock and rollers learn to play, not through formal training but by paying it the same level of attention you pay music itself. Both kinds of attention do music an incalculable service. Of course we can't capture magic moments in words. But we can surround them, approximate them, evoke them, open a window on them, open a window for them – and if we get lucky, maybe even give them a shot of abracadabra.

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