10 Prestige and professionalisation at the margins of the journalistic field

The case of music writers

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We are all by now familiar with the claim that journalists are an endangered species in the digital age. Mass lay-offs in newsrooms, the rise of partisan political bloggers, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsweek* going into receivership – these are flash points in a narrative of professional decline. Advocates of amateur media can of course point to the many contributions to public debate made by citizen journalists and other non-professional writers, but there is still a pervasive nostalgia for a pre-internet era of ostensible journalistic integrity, fastidious fact-checking, and the structural separation of advertising and editorial. Such sentiments reach their apotheosis in widely read polemics like Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur*, which laments the web's 'endless digital forest of mediocrity'.[1]

One curious aspect of this narrative of decline is that it now encompasses areas of journalism that were never professional to begin with. Take for example music criticism, an activity which can only very loosely be described as a profession. Here, one sees all the same apocalyptic predictions about the dilution of standards at the hands of the amateur. Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jacob Levenson lambasts the 'opinion-driven environment of the [music] blogosphere' and its corrosive effects on serious rock criticism, exemplified by the work of Lester Bangs (the fabled *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* scribe) and Robert Christgau (long-time critic for *The Village Voice*).[2] For Levenson, the internet has eroded the authority of the music press, instituted uncritical populism as a norm and merged cultural critique with public relations. The field of music writing becomes, in this line of argument, yet another site across which the de-professionalisation effect of digital technology plays out.

In this chapter, we want to move away from grand claims of decline vs. democratisation and take a closer look at the interactions between professional institutions and amateur cultural production. Popular music writing – encompassing criticism, reviewing and journalism – offers a rich case study in this respect.[3] Music reviews and interviews are staple features of the mainstream press, appearing widely in newspapers since the 1960s, but most of the writers who produce this content work outside the institutional norms of journalism. Almost all are freelancers, many receive no payment whatsoever and most see their work as a hobby rather than a profession. In smaller

markets like Australia (the site of our study), securing an ongoing salaried position is near-impossible, even for the most talented writers. The full-time music critic, despite the currency of this concept within popular culture, barely exists as an industrial category of the creative workforce. Yet, as we argue, the practice of music writing is nonetheless regulated by 'proto-professional' norms and values, which work to give some structure to a disorganised cultural economy.

This tension between writers' precarious working conditions and the highly refined regimes of quality which govern their practice is our primary focus here. In what follows, we track some of the implicit models of professionalisation at play in the Australian music media, showing how these shape the way writers understand their work and their careers. We also consider how the relation between amateur and professional modes of production is being reshaped by online technologies. Our findings are informed by a series of interviews with music writers at various stages of their careers as well as our own experiences over the last decade as writers working in this area.[4]

The changing profile of the music writer

Music writing can best be described as a peripheral creative field, in the sense that it forms part of the creative economy and is subject to sophisticated hierarchies of prestige and value but is not typically regarded as an artistic endeavour in its own right. As cogs in the promotional apparatus of the music industry, music writers promote and contextualise other people's cultural products (records, films, tours, festivals). For this reason, they do not fit easily into the analytical frameworks that have structured most of the existing research on cultural labour, and are better understood as cultural intermediaries rather than cultural producers.[5]

In their history of rock criticism, Lindberg et al. designate the years 1967–72 as the period when amateur writing cohered into a 'field with its own criteria, discourse and "clergy"' of revered figures. This was a largely Anglo-American development, yet it came to structure the practice and culture of music criticism worldwide:

> The field of rock criticism was not only defined as regards content in this period, but also in terms of publications and geography. A few new US rock periodicals established themselves as the center of the field and other channels had to relate to the discourse developed there. From these US centers the discourse spread to most Western countries. Within a few years British rock criticism became about as important as the American, whereas elsewhere rock criticism was peripheral in the sense that it related itself to these centers and was not distributed outside of national arenas, even though these national discourses were often highly developed.[6]

This observation applies well enough to the case of Australia, which has long been a net importer rather than exporter of music writing, but the

industrial structure described here is now much more diffuse. Music-related news, reviews and interviews are now found in a wide variety of outlets, including magazines, books, anthologies, academic publications, trade papers, industry newsletters and fanzines. The dedicated music press exists alongside, and in an interdependent relationship with, a vast online music mediascape (MP3 blogs, review blogs, genre-specific blogs, review aggregators, online magazines, music/lifestyle portals and social media). Music writing also appears in broadcast media, in the form of scripted reviews and other content for radio and TV. It is therefore increasingly difficult to clearly define what music writing is, where it occurs or who produces it. Aspiring writers negotiate an increasingly fragmented media environment as part of their professional practice, in which there are many more outlets for music writing than ever before, though most of these pay their writers little or nothing.

Some brief comments on the demographic characteristics of writers are also in order. Most of the writers we interviewed are in their 20s and early 30s, with a tertiary degree of some sort, frequently in the humanities or social sciences (though few believe this contributes to their abilities or success as a writer). Music writing in Australia is a male-dominated activity: we estimate that at least three-quarters of practising music writers in Australia are men, an observation which corresponds broadly with studies of the music writer workforce in other nations.[7] The reasons for this are disputed by the writers we spoke to, but it seems likely that the imbalance is exacerbated by informal, friend-to-friend commissioning practices, which reproduce a male-dominated writing culture, and the gendered spatiality of rock culture, which revolves around the pub environment. Though we did not observe deliberate policies of exclusion on the part of editors, the very high levels of social and cultural capital needed to do well in this field appear to be the result of informal networks, friendships and associations, the structure of which may exacerbate demographic imbalances that are already present in the rock and indie subcultures from which most writers emerge.

Structures of expertise and quality in music writing

Writing about popular music is, variously, a vehicle for self-expression and a way to make a living; a hobby and an art form; a mode of critique and a promotional activity. Each genre of music writing – from the 100-word CD review to the 10,000-word artist profile – can be the vehicle for public relations, advocacy or cultural commentary, depending on how it is executed. As a result, there is much debate within music writer circles as to whether the role of the writer is to report on current events, to provide objective critique, to support local music industries, to guide consumers in their choices, to champion emerging genres, or to foster elite modes of music appreciation. In the present section, we identify some of the discourses of professionalism that regulate this largely unprofessional field, focusing on three different models of expertise in music writing. While lacking the formal structures associated

with many other fields of creative labour, music writing is nonetheless regulated by tacit ideologies of expertise that writers at all stages of their careers take seriously, which emerge from discrete modes of writing practice in Anglo-American music journalism and their uptake in Australia.[8] For the purposes of analysis we arrange these discourses about music writing along a spectrum, ranging from skill and craft-based accounts of writing practice through to more individualised and 'artistic' discourses.

At one end of the spectrum of professional practice is the kind of efficient, economical writing practice associated with entertainment trade papers. For the better part of a century, trade papers have provided the music industries with information on new releases and tours, technological developments, and profiles of current artists. Among the best-known trade papers are *Billboard* (US) – active since 1896 and running music reviews since the jukebox explosion in the 1930s – and the early *Melody Maker* (UK) – founded as a weekly jazz newspaper in 1926, reborn as a pop mag in the post-war period and folded into *NME* in 2000. Characteristic of this genre of music media is the capsule review, in which the essential elements of a record or live performance are summarily described. Functionalist and instrumental, this mode of music writing values currency above all else: the purpose is to communicate to the reader (often assumed to be an industry worker) what a record sounds like, what its commercial prospects are and where it fits within current scene developments.[9] Individual voice is arguably less important than a writer's ability to keep on top of the latest developments and engage the reader with clean, crisp prose. Prestige is accrued by being extremely well informed about current industry machinations and having clout with record and touring company people. A crucial element in success is flexibility, as one of our respondents (a well-known veteran freelancer) notes:

> I work on assignment now – there are things that I'd like to do and I do get to do them, but I also value the idea that you can give me virtually anything, and I can write a good story on it. It's not about what I like. I write strong, contained, concise, informative [articles] about any actor, director, musician, producer, in any genre, and not anyone can make that switch. That's a skill of the craft.

A different model of professional aspiration can be found in the tradition of 'serious' popular music criticism that emerged in the 1960s. This kind of music writing is associated with the US counter-culture, the alternative press, the New Journalism movement and above all with magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*. In contrast to the functionalist style of the trade press, the new breed of music magazines specialised in New Journalism-influenced immersion reporting in the form of long, literary pieces peppered with autobiographical elements of the writer.[10] Here we see a quite specific ideal of professional music writing, in which flair and writerly voice are privileged.

As Roy Shuker notes, the elevation of rock critics to 'star status' was a central feature of this second model.[11] By-lines began to be more prominently highlighted, appearing on magazine covers. Writing became more individualised and eccentric.[12] This tendency is typified by now-canonical writers including Christgau, Bangs and Jon Landau. Bangs – who died of an overdose in 1982 – looms especially large in the popular canon of music writing, and has become synonymous with a certain romantic model of rock criticism as vocation. While his skills as a writer were certainly formidable, Bangs' fame has as much to do with his anti-professional disposition. Consider the following quote, in which Bangs articulates his distaste for the professional music media and the entertainment industries in general:

> I think everybody's a rock critic, to the extent that you when go into a record store and you decide to buy this one over that one, you're being a rock critic. I don't have any more credentials than anyone else … I think that being a rock critic a lot of times—the impetus for me and a lot of people I knew was just that we really love rock 'n' roll and wanted to talk about it, you know? And there was this outlet. And what kind of makes me mad is a lot of times today it looks like a lot of rock critics that are writing in these magazines it's like a good way to get a start in a career in journalism or something, you know? It's not—you don't sense a real passion for the music.[13]

Through canonical figures like Bangs, the post-New Journalism model of music criticism has established a set of codes and forms for 'serious' criticism which endure to this day. As such, this genre of music writing represents a curious intersection of amateur and professional modes of production, incorporating an ethos of anti-professionalism ('everybody's a rock critic') alongside a strong code of ethics (independence, integrity, a commitment to subjective but consistent evaluative criteria) which constitutes a kind of *de facto* Hippocratic Oath for music writers.[14] From this perspective, being a good music writer is about maintaining distance from the corrupting pressures of the record industry – a very different ideology of professionalism compared to that which regulates the trade-paper tradition.

As the balance of power shifted from music magazines to online media in the 1990s and 2000s,[15] new kinds of writing practice have emerged in response to a rapidly changing landscape of music distribution. For example, the ability to sample music online via MP3 streaming and downloads has fundamentally diminished the gatekeeping, juridical role of the writer. In the internet age, the writer no longer functions as privileged intermediary, describing and interpreting music that the reader cannot hear for themselves. In response, two related strategies for reaffirming the value of music writing present themselves, both of which update the aforementioned professional models in different ways. In some cases, the writer acts as a curator or cultural filter, echoing aspects of the trade-paper function; in other cases, there is a

movement towards elite and anti-professional criticism, thus extending (and deepening) the neo-romantic model of serious music writing.

The salient example here is music blogging. On the one hand, blogs have provided an autonomous space, away from the demands of the recording industry and music press, for writers to develop long-form, in-depth music criticism following the model of the critic-intellectual, where the writing itself is expected to stand alone as a worthwhile artefact. For example, UK critic Mark Fisher's well-known blog *k-punk* blends detailed aesthetic analysis with cultural theory in his discussion of contemporary genres – framing dubstep, for instance, through Derrida's notion of hauntology. On the other hand, the trade tradition has been reinvented with the emergence of regularly updated MP3 blogs which, although they organise their functions and appeal around the consumer – rather than the industry – keeping abreast of trends, still act as more or less acknowledged intermediaries between the two.[16] Incorporating concise, functional posts describing and hosting emerging artists' songs (often intentionally 'seeded' to blogs by publicity firms) as well as coverage of news and rumours for established acts, these blogs also tend to limit themselves to particular genres or scenes, purporting to act as filters selecting for their readers the best new music in a certain area. This curatorial model of hyper-current MP3 blogs echoes the norms and rhythms of trade press publishing even within the most apparently unprofessional reaches of the internet.

The history of *Pitchfork Media*, arguably the most influential review website in the rock/indie field for the past decade, reflects this cohabitation of critical and curatorial models online. Beginning in 1995 as an upstart webzine with a staff of one, *Pitchfork* is now often described as this generation's *Rolling Stone* for its ability to break new bands and canonise established ones.[17] It has also fostered its own intellectual standard of knowledgeable, in-depth criticism, positioning itself as a bastion of 'quality' music writing in an online landscape apparently littered with poorly formulated, indiscriminate blogging. *Pitchfork*'s maturation into a fully fledged indie institution, with its own dedicated following, house style and lucrative spin-off music festivals, combines the DIY, auto-didact ethos of internet culture with a savvy understanding of the industrial dynamics of an increasingly deformalised record industry.

Nonetheless, in recent years *Pitchfork* has ceded a certain power to blogs and implicitly admitted it cannot keep up with the lightning pace of new music, effectively outsourcing its more timely, workaday writing to a coterie of international bloggers for its own blog *Altered Zones*, which focuses on fast-morphing, bedroom-musician subgenres such as witch house and chillwave. Whereas its main site features extended critical reviews and features, *Altered Zones*' bloggers cleave to the same no-frills, short-form, instrumental writing that defines other MP3 blogs. The mode of professionalism valued here is similar to that of the industry reporter, in that these writers have an intimate knowledge of the scenes they report on and an ability to filter what is most worthwhile. This recent alliance with the amateur specialists of *Altered Zones*

reflects the centripetal logic of crowdsourcing-as-renewal that is such a feature of internet economies. The decision to create two sites thus not only speaks to a certain relationship between established and emerging outlets, but also between different practices of music writing – the curatorial, 'post-critical'[18] model of *Altered Zones* updates the industry reporter, whereas the erudite *Pitchfork* scribe is indebted to the intellectual–critic.

These developments within rock criticism in the US and UK are of relevance not only to those nations. Rather, they have generated industrial structures and trajectories of professionalisation for writers around the world, especially in media markets which take their lead from the Anglo-American music spheres. In the following section, we consider how these discrepant traditions of professional music writing interact with local practices and industry structures in Australia.

The music media food chain: career trajectories in Australia

In Australia, imported music media exist alongside an array of domestic publications and local websites. Models of expertise associated with each of these scales of music media cross-pollinate, resulting in a diverse array of writing practices and industrial arrangements. To understand the relationship between professional and amateur modes of cultural production in this field, we must pay attention to the interplay between local and imported traditions of music media. This section will provide some context for how the Australian industry operates before moving on to consider some of the issues shaping how writing careers are established and maintained.

A key feature of the Australian market is the relative absence of national music magazines. Unlike the US and UK, where monthly glossies and weekly trade papers have played a central role in popular music culture, the Australian market is not big enough to sustain more than a few publications over the long term, and numerous dedicated music mags – *Juke*, *Ram*, *Juice*, *Go Set* – have come and gone over the years.[19] As a result, the tradition of long-form print music journalism is relatively weak. Australian readers look to imported magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Uncut* and *The Wire*, and now to music blogs and websites, for long-form music writing, while seeking out the more fast-moving local knowledge (gig listings, touring acts, industry movements) in metropolitan 'streetpress' magazines.

These streetpress magazines are a distinctive feature of the Australian music mediascape. Weekly or bi-weekly publications like *Beat* and *Inpress* (Melbourne), *Drum Media* and *3D World* (Sydney), and *Rave* (Brisbane) have long performed the descriptive and promotional roles associated with trade papers, functioning as rough-and-ready guides to local music scenes.[20] Distributed freely at shops and music venues, these advertiser-funded publications contain extensive gig listings along with short reviews, articles and columns. Their function is mimetic rather than agenda-setting: a successful street paper needs to reflect the priorities of the city's local record industry, the state of the live music

scene and the rhythms of the international touring schedule. There is little room here for 'serious' music journalism.

Streetpress has long been the first port of call for aspiring music writers in Australia. It occupies a position at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy, as content is dictated by advertising (it is an unwritten law that purchasing advertising space leads to favourable coverage). This is reflected in the pay rates for writers: gig and CD reviews are typically unpaid, while interviews attract rates as low as A$30, sometimes less. While well-connected writers sometimes syndicate work to multiple outlets and to magazines overseas, most find it impossible to live on streetpress wages alone. For this reason, there is a constant need for new writers and correspondingly low barriers to entry.

In the pre-internet age, the typical career trajectory for a successful Australian music writer was to start out in the streetpress then, after a few years, move into writing reviews on a freelance basis for the handful of Australian monthlies or more prestigious US/UK-based magazines. The most successful of the streetpress writers graduated to become CD/gig reviewers for daily newspapers like *The Age* in Melbourne or *The Sydney Morning Herald*, with the handful of full-time music critic roles going to the 'old guard' in the field.[21] However, the internet has dramatically transformed this career structure, eroding the (already weak) base of paid employment. The story is a familiar one: in the face of stiff competition from online media, newspapers and music magazines are seeing their advertising revenues tumble and are sizing-down their workforces. Opportunities for music writers within the print sector are in steep decline.

Online music media has absorbed most of the functions of the music press and generated many new fora for reviewing and criticism, without necessarily replicating the industrial structures of the print economy. Within the major Australian music news/reviews websites, the competing traditions of music writing mapped out earlier – functionalist reportage vs. neo-romantic criticism – are reconfigured and remixed. Websites like *FasterLoude*r, owned by Sydney-based new media company Sound Alliance, are comparable to streetpress magazines in terms of what they offer (listings, gig guides and short, descriptive reviews) and in what they pay (little or nothing).[22] Other music websites like *inthemix* and *Mess+Noise* are considered more professional and maintain a smaller, dedicated writing staff. The latter pays reasonably well for articles: up to A$100 for features and A$30 for reviews. Mainstream media companies also compete within this online space through entertainment and lifestyle portals, and often pay higher wages (lifestyle portal *The Vine*, owned by newspaper publisher Fairfax, is one example).

In comparison to these websites, which are more or less established and professional operations, the Australian music blogosphere is highly fragmented, encompassing semi-professionalised news blogs, MP3 blogs that mainly post new music with little or no contextual editorial, and smaller scale, individually run fan, genre and criticism blogs devoted to particular micro-scenes. Whilst the last might be seen as the most 'amateur' forms of music writing, the often in-depth, knowledgeable, long-form criticism that takes place on them

complicates this label. So too does the increasing legitimacy of bloggers within the music industry. Key Australian bloggers are now courted by record industry and touring company promo staff, receiving all the usual enticements to offer favourable coverage: free tickets, CDs, promo items, invitations to launches, drink cards, and so on. Many scenes are now almost entirely driven by blog-hype, and certain bloggers have assumed an unprecedented level of recognition, both at the level of international scene developments and in the more localised gig/tour/club-based scenes (the blogger as local celebrity).[23] This reflects the increasing divergence between different constituent features of the 'professional', as levels of influence and prestige become separated from conditions of remuneration. Hence it becomes difficult to equate blogs with amateur media in any meaningful sense, as the blogosphere is increasingly the site for entrepreneurial, careerist activity among writers.

Living and labouring at the edges of the music industry

The technological and industrial restructuring of the music-writing field described in the previous section is understood in various ways by the writers we interviewed. Very few share the despondent sentiments of Andrew Keen or Jacob Leveson about the deprofessionalising effects of digital media. On the contrary, almost all are enthusiastic about the potential and diversity of internet-enabled music writing, and most take a pragmatic approach to the current climate. One Sydney-based writer and editor comments that '[l]ike all journalism, the web has completely pulled down the barriers between amateurs and professionals. Music journalism is not a career I'd want to be paying my mortgage on. But for the most part, it never was.' Note that this is not a cause for lament. This same writer argues that Australian music writing is now in a much healthier and more diverse state than ever before, as the 'removal of "career opportunities" has the benefit of introducing a much more experimental ethos'.

The same sentiment is echoed by other bloggers who see their work as a proudly non-commercial hobby or vocation. This is the mode of music writing closest to the traditional understanding of the amateur, a participant motivated by love not money. Many highly successful bloggers operate within this framework, rejecting a professional model of full-time employment in favour of a different, and more proudly romantic, understanding of the role of the music critic:

> My love of music and writing and wanting to share it with the world motivates me to maintain [my blog] …
>
> [We] have a very deliberate and reflexive policy of never monetising the blog or turning it into a going concern. This keeps it within a kind of gift economy, and helps us build genuine trust with the artists and readers who we respect. And this is worth much more than money (provided you have a salary from elsewhere […]).

This approach to music writing represents a curious combination of amateur and professional tendencies, reflecting a highly refined code of ethics in the absence of a formal industrial structure. It is also worth noting that many of the younger writers we spoke to have grown up in an era of online music media and harbour no real nostalgia for the magazine/newspaper system. For music writers in these categories, the free-labour conditions of music writing are a fact of life – sometimes a blessing, but certainly not a tragedy.

Between this pro-bono model and the more straightforwardly careerist aspirations of other bloggers, there is a grey zone of professional aspiration in which arguably the majority of writers are situated. This space is characterised by a partial and ambivalent relationship with salaried modes of writing employment, and a desire to combine writing work with other kinds of engagement with the creative industries. The desire is not necessarily to 'make it' as a full-time journalist but to follow a more flexible career-path through a variety of creative fields. Many bloggers, and even some magazine writers, end up parlaying their skills, knowledge and reputation as a music writer into other forms of income-generating activity. Some of our respondents started out as music writers and subsequently moved into news journalism, but keep penning gig and CD reviews as a hobby. Others have moved into adjacent fields, such as travel and lifestyle writing. As one well-known music critic, who now works as a technology writer commented:

> I often tell people I could earn ten times as much by writing about a stereo system than the music that gets played through it. I reckon it's because different kinds of journalism are buoyed by the industries they cover. The music industry is running out of money nowadays, so that means no more advertisements in magazines and so on. The consumer electronics industry, on the other hand, has buckets of money right now. Check out how many full-time, salaried technology journalists there are at the moment and then compare it to the number of music journos in the same boat.

There is also the option of using one's blog or column as a platform for other music-related pursuits which generate income, slender as it may be. One writer we interviewed runs club nights under the brand of his blog and another has established a small-scale record label. Others have made forays into public relations, writing bios and promotional material for record labels. Writing becomes one of a range of ways of engaging with a scene, and potentially making some money on the side.

This kind of flexible and pragmatic engagement with the media bears a resemblance to what Angela McRobbie described in 2002 as the characteristic form of post-UK 'Summer of Love' creative labour, in which the networked sociability and small-scale entrepreneurialism characteristic of club culture becomes a foundation of economic life in casualised workforces. The argument here is for the co-constitutive nature of casual work and creative life, hence McRobbie's claim that 'the intoxicating pleasures of leisure culture have now,

for a sector of the under 35s, provided the template for managing an identity in the world of work'.[24] However, it must be stressed that none of our respondents, many of whom are well trained in cultural studies critique, saw their activities in these terms.

This brings us to the thorny question of exploitation. There is no doubt that this field exhibits many of the features of the dubious creative industries work practices critiqued by Andrew Ross and others, in which labour is given for free in the name of passion or love of music.[25] The over-supply of writers lets unscrupulous editors, their inboxes overflowing with the CVs of eager young scribes, make unreasonable demands of their staff (most frequently: unpaid work). Furthermore, the unionisation of writers in Australia is extremely low – only one of our 20 respondents was a paid-up union member – which means that collective action about issues such as pay and conditions is almost impossible. Exploitation of writers is normalised by these structural conditions.

There are a number of complicating factors we should take into account here. Critiques of creative labour sometimes assume a scenario of systematic exploitation by 'big media', in which labour is extracted from fans and non-professionals as a way for media companies to save on professionally produced content. The music media in Australia do not fit comfortably into this narrative. Unlike in the UK, where magazines such as *NME* are part of consolidated publishing businesses, most of the online and print-based music media in Australia is the province of undercapitalised small-to-medium sized businesses, many of which are not particularly profitable.[26] This is not to say that the prevailing commissioning practices are ethical, or that publishers could not afford to increase their pay rates if they so desired. But the 'free labour, big profits' narrative is not an accurate representation of how the music media work in Australia. The lack of unionisation among writers also reflects, to some degree, a lack of appropriate forms of industrial representation for casual workers at the fringes of the Australian media.

The writers we spoke to are under no illusions about the nature of the industry. All have their own ways of balancing paid employment with other kinds of personally fulfilling creative work. Many of the unpaid writers do not see their practice as an income-generating activity – and some like it that way. Others have an informal moral code which shapes their professional practice (one writer mentioned that she only does unpaid writing for small non-profit websites, but never for commercial publishers). Hence we must be alert to the agency of cultural workers such as these, even in a context of extreme precarity. As David Hesmondhalgh notes, it is important to resist an 'undifferentiated critique of free labour', while at the same time decrying those employment practices that are clearly exploitative.[27]

In this and other ways, the sub-industry of music writing provides some food for thought for research into the dynamics of cultural and creative industries. As we have shown throughout this chapter, music writing is produced under circumstances that could best be described as amateur. At the same time, such work is shaped by pervasive and powerful discourses of

quality, value and professionalism. This is one of the many paradoxes that structure this industry-of-sorts. Music writing's unusual position as a secondary or intermediary field – located at the fringes of journalism, and simultaneously outside and within the music industry – distinguishes it from other related fields devoted to the production of tangible cultural commodities. The work of music writers, while generating consumable 'content', is fundamentally about the contextualisation and appreciation of other people's work. Hence music writers have a kind of split personality, suspended half way between art and public relations, cultural production and critique, the music industry and the content business.

The ongoing challenge for these writers, then, as for many other cultural intermediaries, is to reconcile creative expression and professional practice within an environment characterised by informal and precarious career structures and constant institutional and cultural change. In this chapter, we have outlined how the models of 'serious' critic and trade reporter have been deployed and updated by writers and publishers alike in trying to reconcile these demands. Although technological shifts – in this case, the 'threat' of the rising tide of mediocre amateur writing online – may be the stated impetus for certain responses to this challenge, we have endeavoured throughout this chapter to demonstrate the more long-standing, multifaceted industrial and vocational aspects at stake in this issue and the more complex traffic between (and redefinition of) categories of amateur and professional as they are played out in this particular cultural field. It is this dichotomy that can be said to contribute most to the schismatic experience of the music writer, and there remains much to be said about the fine grain of how this dynamic is resolved in practice.

Notes

1 Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today's User-Generated Media are Destroying our Economy, our Culture, and our Values*, New York: Crown Business, 2008.

2 Jacob Levenson, 'Why John Lennon Matters: The Case for Professional Pop-Music Critics in an Amateur Age' (2009) *Columbia Journalism Review* 54, 58.

3 We do not draw a fine line between different sub-categories of music writing as we found that most writers move fluidly between these genres, depending on the publication they are writing for and the audience they are addressing. Note also that we have focused on rock, pop and indie writers, who constitute the centre of gravity for the music press and online music media in Australia, rather than on writers specialising in electronic, roots, urban or other genres.

4 Twenty music writers at various stages of their careers were surveyed in late 2010 on the extent and nature of the work they perform, their feelings about their practice and the institutions surrounding it and their personal philosophy of writing. Data were gathered primarily through questionnaires with a small number of face-to-face and telephone interviews conducted with more experienced writers.

5 The current discussion of cultural intermediaries can be traced back to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who used the term 'new cultural intermediaries' in reference to arts and culture critics. It has since been taken up in a variety of scholarly contexts and for different

analytical purposes (for critical overviews, see David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, London: Sage, 2002, pp. 53–54; Keith Negus, 'The Work of Cultural Intermediaries and the Enduring Distance between Production and Consumption' (2002) 16(4) *Cultural Studies* 501). On arts journalism as a sphere of cultural production, see Gemma Harries and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, 'The Culture of Arts Journalists' (2007) 8(6) *Journalism* 619. On cultural labour more generally, see Tiziana Terranova, 'Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy' (2000) 18(2) *Social Text* 33; Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*, New York: New York University Press, 2009; David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010.

6 Ulf Lindberg, Gestur Gudmundsson, Morten Michelsen and Hans Weisenthaunet, *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers and Cool-Headed Cruisers*, New York: Peter Lang, 2005, p. 131.

7 Robert O. Wyatt and Geoffrey P. Hull, 'The Music Critic in the American Press: A Nationwide Survey of Newspapers and Magazines' (1989) 17(3) *Mass Communication Review* 38. On gender politics in music media more generally, see Kembrew McLeod, '"One and a Half Stars": A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America' (2001) 20(1) *Popular Music* 47; Helen Davies, 'All Rock and Roll Is Homosocial: The Representation of Women in the British Rock Music Press' (2001) 20(3) *Popular Music* 301. For a UK perspective on the question of ethnic diversity in creative workforces, see Kate Oakley, 'Include Us Out: Economic Development and Social Policy in the Creative Industries' (2006) 15(4) *Cultural Trends* 255.

8 A handful of universities, including NYU, now offer postgraduate degrees in cultural journalism and related fields. But there is little evidence that these accreditation systems have currency in the music press and online media.

9 In Australia, as we discuss below, comparable functions are performed by streetpress magazines and event listings websites, which value a similarly economical writing style.

10 Eamonn Forde, 'From Polyglottism to Branding: On the Decline of Personality Journalism in the British Music Press' (2001) 2(1) *Journalism* 23.

11 Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 85.

12 Forde, 'From Polyglottism to Branding'.

13 RockCritics.com, Everyone's a Rock Critic: The Lost Lester Bangs Interview: http://rockcriticsarchives.com/interviews/lesterbangs/lesterbangs.html.

14 This model of the music critic values currency and industry knowledge less than what Forde describes as 'polyglottism' – an idiosyncratic, subjective form of writing, involving an almost wilful anti-professionalism. See Forde, 'From Polyglottism to Branding'.

15 As has been well documented, most music magazines are struggling to survive amidst fierce competition from online media sources. Many venerable titles – including *Vibe*, *Blender*, *Melody Maker* and *No Depression* – have gone bankrupt or merged with other titles.

16 Though blogs are often discussed as if they were a new form of independent fan production circulating outside of established institutional channels, they are often fuelled by decidedly commercial motives; whilst the remuneration may be negligible, popularity, credibility and professional standing are key motivators for these writers. See Beatrice Jetto 'Music Blogs, Music Scenes, Sub-Cultural Capital: Emerging Practices in Music Blogs' (paper presented at Cybercultures: Exploring Critical Issues, Salzburg, Austria, 13 March 2010).

17 Music industry commentators refer to 'the *Pitchfork* effect', which is as much about influencing consumers directly as it is the trickle-down effect of guiding trends on other, smaller blogs. See Greg Kot, *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music*, New York: Scribner, 2009, p. 121.

18 Simon Reynolds, 'Leave Chillwave Alone', The Village Voice (online), 19 January 2011: www.villagevoice.com/2011-01-19/music/leave-chillwave-alone.

19 The longest-running title is the Australian edition of *Rolling Stone*. Other monthly magazines being published today include *triple j magazine* (formerly *jmag*) and *Blunt*.

20 Marc Brennan, 'This Place Rocks! The Brisbane Street Press, Local Culture, Identity and Economy' (2007) 21(3) *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 433; Sean Sennett

and Simon Groth, *Off the Record: 25 Years of Music Street Press*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2010.

21 The US tradition of the 'resident' music critic for a respected publication is not as widespread in Australia, though notable exceptions exist. Robert Forster, lead singer of the much-loved 1970s/1980s pop band The Go-Betweens, writes long-form reviews for *The Monthly*; and the *Sydney Morning Herald* employs full-time music journalist Bernard Zuel.

22 *FasterLouder* is particularly interesting for its explicit prosumer model in which a large number of readers submit all editorial for free: it is seen as the most basic entry-point into music writing in Australia.

23 This is indicative of the small scale of many niche genres: most promoters are deeply embedded in the scene and are avid readers of its key publications, while more than a few readers are involved in the industry themselves, through dabbling with music production, promotions, touring, et cetera. It also reflects the 'symbiotic' as well as osmotic tendencies of many contemporary music scenes. See Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, London: Arnold, 1992.

24 Angela McRobbie, 'Clubs to Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture in Speeded up Creative Worlds' (2002) 16(4) *Cultural Studies* 520.

25 Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*, New York: NYU Press, 2009.

26 The exception to this rule is the daily newspaper publishers and their online arms which still pay respectable rates for music-related content (though their treatment of freelancers is frequently criticised).

27 Hesmondhalgh's example is the system of unpaid internships. See David Hesmondhalgh, 'User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries' (2010) 10(3–4) *Ephemera* 278.