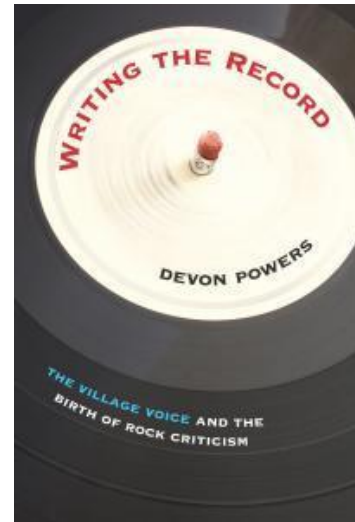


Devon Powers, **Writing the Record: *The Village Voice* and the Birth of Rock Criticism**, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013, 176 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

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When I first became interested in popular music studies as a graduate student and began reading the array of scholarly publications in the field, one of the things that struck me as strange was the almost complete lack of dialogue and engagement with the works of music critics. Even such insightful and influential works as British sociologist (and former critic) Simon Frith's *Performing Rites* (1996) or American philosopher Theodore Gracyk's *Rhythm and Noise* (1996), studies that are directly concerned with the way we evaluate popular music, draw their ideas mainly from the works of other sociologists, philosophers, and intellectuals. They pay only a modest amount of attention to the fact that there is a whole class of professionals whose field of expertise is the analysis and evaluation of popular music. The unspoken assumption behind the majority of scholarly works on popular music is that music critics are legitimate *objects* of study, that one can investigate their cultural roles as tastemakers and gatekeepers or interrogate their writings in order to identify dominant social trends of thinking about music. Yet, there is very little to *learn* from them as actual intellectual companions.



***Writing the Record***, the debut monograph by media scholar Devin Powers, is partly an attempt to rectify this situation. Powers tells the story of the formation of rock criticism in the United States by focusing on the writings of the New York-based weekly *The Village Voice*'s first two rock critics, Richard Goldstein and Robert Christgau. In doing so, Powers aims to demonstrate how the early critics “behaved as public intellectuals and deserve a prominent place in the intellectual history of popular music studies” (p. 2). For Powers, labeling critics as “public intellectuals” is meant to erode some of the barriers between academia and music journalism, to “emphasize the role of rock critics as knowledge producers whose sociological and humanistic perspectives on music were not limited strictly to the management of taste or the maintenance of their own authority” (p. 8). The majority of the book deals with the *Voice*'s critics' differing and sometimes contradictory stances on three main issues—mass culture, “hype,” and identity politics—and the wider institutional, historical, cultural, and intellectual context in which they carried out these debates.

Established in 1955 as a local paper for New York's bohemian Greenwich Village neighborhood, *The Village Voice* would prove to be a defining force in the birth of American rock criticism. Powers' recounting of the *Voice*'s foundation and early days illustrates how the paper's unique journalistic character took shape through a constant balancing act “of the Village's bohemian myth and its multi-cultural reality; of the paper's proletarian beginnings and capitalistic aspirations; of the time period's

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conservative veneer yet radical underbelly" (p. 24). In this process, claims Powers, *The Voice* did not merely reflect the values and ideas of Greenwich Village's existing residents, but also took an active part in producing a new community while expanding its borders beyond the neighborhood, the city, and eventually, the state and even the country. The paper's proclaimed amateurism and lack of censorship or editorial interference enabled its writers to experiment with journalistic practices which were unacceptable in mainstream publications at the time. This freedom would manifest itself in the personal, participatory, and often markedly political language of its rock critics, as well as in the very decision to publish the first regular rock-focused column in the United States: Richard Goldstein's "Pop Eye."

Goldstein's career as a music critic lasted only a couple of years, yet according to Powers, his impact was enormous, as his criticism, dubbed "pop aestheticism" (p. 67), managed to both "intentionally [de-territorialize] the categories of high and low" and "reshape the relationship between culture's mainstream and its margins" (p. 75). Operating in an era when "mass culture" was still anathema to the majority of the intellectual community, Goldstein argued for the importance of taking popular music seriously. His interest in rock was not limited to its aesthetic dimensions, as he initially envisioned popular culture as a revolutionary force carrying significant political implications. However, Goldstein's enthusiasm was short-lived, and it only took a few months after Pop Eye's June 1966 debut for him to become seriously worried about the direction that he perceived popular music to be taking.

Declaring rock to be dead is a very common gesture among music critics, as English professor Kevin J. H. Dettmar (2005) detailed in his meticulous survey of that assertion's history. Dettmar, though, managed to miss Goldstein's early contribution to this time-honored tradition, and Powers fills in this gap with an elaborate examination of Goldstein's gradual-yet-brutal disenchantment with rock. For Goldstein, the main culprit was "hype," the music industry's relentless promotion and overexposure of both mainstream and "underground" music, which was depriving the music of its authenticity and folk roots in order to turn it into a money-making machine. To avoid becoming an unwilling collaborator in this process, Goldstein shifted his critical stress to the negative, remodeling himself as "a Cassandra who foretold the demise of the music and lamented its inability to deliver anything other than another demographic" (p. 89). By late 1968, Goldstein's faith in rock's political potential had completely vanished, and he left his job as a critic shortly thereafter.

Goldstein's successor at *The Village Voice*, Robert Christgau, displayed quite a different intellectual temperament. Characterized by a self-aware, ironic attitude toward both the music and his own function as a critic, Christgau did not seek to settle rock's inherent contradictions, but rather, "to highlight them, in a manner playfully serious and seriously playful" (p. 119). The synthesis between his pragmatism and candidness about his position and its limitations is perhaps best exemplified by his "Consumer Guide" column, where he awarded each album a letter grade followed by a brief review. As Powers puts it, "the condensed form [of the Guide] was both a management strategy for contending with the labor that criticism now demanded, and a commentary on how to conduct it" (p. 117). Powers' analysis of Christgau's work centers mainly around questions of identity politics and the fragmentation of the rock community, juxtaposing his perspective as a white essayist with the more militant stance taken by the *Voice's* only black rock critic, Carman Moore. Rounding out the book are Powers' thoughts about the role of the critic and the allegedly dwindling status of criticism in contemporary society, putting

forward the idea of public intellectualism as “counterpublicity,” “a style of publicity that mounts a strategic defense against the vulgar populism that equates reach with importance” (p. 133).

Despite occasionally showing its roots as a doctoral dissertation, *Writing the Record* is mostly clearly written and jargon-free, and it should be accessible not only to scholars, but also to undergraduates, as well as anyone interested in the history of journalism or rock criticism. A serious scholarly appraisal of the works of major rock critics is certainly long overdue, and all in all, Powers makes a convincing case for Goldstein’s and Christgau’s importance as public intellectuals. However, the study would have benefited from remembering that, before being intellectuals, Goldstein and Christgau were first of all *music* critics (Christgau still is). There is a lot to learn from *Writing the Record* about Goldstein’s and Christgau’s opinions regarding the political, social, and cultural context of the music they were reviewing, but not as much can be glimpsed about their approach to the music itself. This is especially unfortunate in the case of Goldstein, who, though sympathetically portrayed, eventually comes off as a somewhat humorless political activist who lost all interest in rock music the moment he figured that it was not going to bring on a socialist revolution.

Reading Goldstein’s original reviews, such as his controversial *New York Times* dismissal of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (2006/1967), it is evident that he also had a sharp and perceptive understanding of such subjects as genre, performance, and the interplay between music and lyrics. In the current state of popular music studies, I think that a critical discussion of these issues is more important than another venture into the mass culture debate. Still, Powers performs an important service in making the case for taking rock critics seriously. Hopefully, *Writing the Record* will be followed by additional studies that widen the scope of what we can learn from the writings of Goldstein, Christgau, and other “relatives to our own practice as (counter)public intellectuals” (p. 133).

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