

Down Beat vs. Rolling Stone:
the battle for authority in the American music press, 1967-1970.

“There are straws in the wind that the future paths of jazz and rock may converge—already, there is much interaction.” That was Dan Morgenstern writing in 1967, as he announced that Down Beat magazine would be expanding its editorial perspective to include rock music in its coverage. He had just taken over as editor-in-chief from his friend Don DeMichael, who had held the position for the previous six years. Morgenstern continued:

Down Beat, as the world’s leading publication dedicated to [jazz], America’s only original art form, has watched musical fads come and go, but has never overlooked significant trends or changes in our music. And the fact that many of the most gifted young rock musicians are showing an increasing awareness of jazz ... as well as the growing sophistication of [rock] music itself, are significant trends of great potential ... There is no better medium for creative reportage and commentary on these fascinating happenings than Down Beat, whose staff and contributors are uniquely qualified observers ... [Our rock coverage] will be interesting, we predict, even to those of our readers who have yet to be convinced that this new music has artistic merit and is related to jazz. Of them, we only ask an open mind.¹

Morgenstern’s announcement raises a number of interesting questions. First, he wrote that “there is already much interaction between jazz and rock” almost three years before Miles Davis released *Bitches Brew*, an album often cited as “virtually creating jazz-rock fusion”: what early jazz-rock experiments was he referring to? Second, Down Beat had occasionally reported on developments in rock ‘n’ roll and popular music insofar as they were relevant to the jazz community, but had always maintained that jazz was the primary focus: so what prompted this remarkable change in editorial policy? And finally, Morgenstern stated that Down Beat was “uniquely qualified” to report on these events, and it certainly was: the publisher boasted that “music enthusiasts spend more money to read [Down Beat] than the total spent to read all other music publications published in the US”, making Down Beat by far the biggest audited music magazine in America.² A fledgling magazine called Rolling Stone had started up that same year and also aimed to report on the rock music scene, but its first issue only sold 6,000 copies; Down Beat, on the other hand, dwarfed that circulation twelve times over. So what happened that caused Down Beat to lose its dominance in the American music press, and left it trailing behind Rolling Stone in a few short years? This paper attempts to address these questions by exploring the paths of two music magazines, one new and one old, and how they dealt with the developments in the relationship between jazz and rock in the years leading up to the release of *Bitches Brew*, ending at the so-called beginning of the fusion era.

JAZZ-ROCK INTERACTIONS: 1967-1968

¹ 29 June 1967, 13.

² 6 April 1967, 51.

Much as we like to think of jazz and rock as separate musical traditions, it doesn't follow that their listening audiences are mutually exclusive, and this is no less true today than it was in the 1960s. Jazz and pop music have influenced one another for as long as they have existed. However, the jazz community had a strong and largely negative reaction to the birth of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s. An article from *Down Beat* during that time sums up the sentiment: "if with regret, we've no choice but to admit rock 'n' roll is part of our national culture, for the present, anyway. To eradicate it, or at least to demote it, seems to be a matter of urgency... rock 'n' roll has got to go".³

Since that time, rock 'n' roll was dismissed at various points as simplistic, vulgar, and crassly commercial youth music; in fact, such discourse bore a great resemblance to early critiques of jazz in the 1920s and 30s. But this all changed in the middle of the sixties, when rock artists began to break down the conventional barriers between high and low art; the Beatles incorporated techniques from avant-garde musique concrete and symphonic orchestration, while Bob Dylan drew inspiration from modernist poetry for his song lyrics. In his book *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, Bernard Gendron makes a convincing case for a fundamental shift in critical attitudes towards rock music between 1963 and 1968, which led to what he calls the "cultural accreditation" of rock during this time.

Rock musicians were also borrowing ideas from jazz. Members of Cream, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Byrds, the Grateful Dead, and Big Brother and the Holding Company were all heavily interested in jazz and used elements of it in their own music. Meanwhile, a young generation of jazz musicians such as vibist Gary Burton, saxophonist Charles Lloyd and guitarist Larry Coryell were embracing rock music and incorporating it into their jazz output. By 1967 rock and jazz musicians were increasingly getting together to jam and form large groups like Blood Sweat and Tears and Chicago; these two bands were merely the most visible signs of growing relations between certain parts of the jazz and rock communities.

** I'll now play you a clip of a song by Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield called "His Holy Modal Majesty," which is one of the best tributes to John Coltrane recorded by musicians who started out in the rock idiom. Al Kooper's ondioline solo is in G dorian, and fuses the ideas of modal jazz with a more blues-rock-oriented accompaniment from the rhythm section.

DOWN BEAT'S DECISION TO COVER ROCK

These early interactions between jazz and rock musicians were also representative of similar interactions happening at the level of amateur musicians and audiences, and this becomes important for its impact on *Down Beat* magazine. Contrary to popular belief, the readership of *Down Beat* was not primarily an older generation that had grown up with jazz, but young males in their late teens and twenties—very much the same age and gender demographic that *Rolling Stone* would appeal to in the near future.

³ 19 September 1956, 39.

Although Down Beat had started out in the swing era as a publication read mainly by dance band musicians, it had survived by re-inventing itself as a magazine for serious fans, and crucially, young learning musicians. The rise of the stage band movement in America meant that significant numbers of high school students were being turned onto jazz music, and since Down Beat's main advertising revenue came from instrument manufacturers during its days as a magazine for working musicians, it was a relatively easy transition to turn their marketing efforts towards younger, learning musicians looking to buy instruments.

This advertising base would remain largely unchanged by 1967. The difference was that ever since the arrival of the Beatles, young amateur musicians were buying far more electric six-string guitars, bass guitars, and drums than they were trumpets, trombones, or saxophones. Down Beat had a potentially lucrative readership of learning musicians who were listening to at least as much rock as jazz, and instrument manufacturers were eager to exploit that market. The signs were there as early as 1965, when you could find advertisements in Down Beat for Vox guitars and amps that featured pictures of the Beatles and used the slogan "The Sound of the Longhairs". But these ads were totally at odds with the content and editorial direction of the magazine.

The editors and most of the staff at Down Beat rarely listened to rock, but the magazine's advertisers urged its owner, John Maher, to put pressure on editors to openly include rock coverage. When Dan Morgenstern announced to readers the new editorial direction of Down Beat, he cited the increasing sophistication in rock music and the increasing interactions between jazz and rock as the reasons for the change. This was all true, but the third reason remained unwritten: advertisers believed there was an untapped market of young people buying rock records and musical instruments, and since Down Beat appeared to be the most obvious vehicle to market and promote these products, they wanted the content of the magazine to better reflect and attract this new kind of readership.

THE INFLUENCE OF JAZZ CRITICISM ON ROLLING STONE

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, a twenty-one-year-old university dropout named Jann Wenner and his mentor, Ralph Gleason, were about to start up a new magazine aimed directly at the rock audience. If it were up to Wenner, the magazine would have been called *The Electric Newspaper*, but Gleason objected and instead suggested the name *Rolling Stone*.

Wenner had no interest in jazz, and the magazine reflected his rock 'n' roll tastes. There are two ways, however, in which the world of jazz criticism influenced Rolling Stone during its early stages. First, of course, is the role of Ralph Gleason, who had earned his reputation as one America's most famous jazz critics, writing for a wide range of publications including *Down Beat* and a regular column for the San Francisco Chronicle which was syndicated to over 60 other newspapers in the country. Gleason was able to consider contemporary issues in the rock scene, like the problem of musicians being

exploited by their recording and publishing contracts, and give them a sense of historical perspective by relating them to similar events in jazz history. Ben Fong-Torres recalls that for a guy who was rarely in the Rolling Stone office, preferring to work at home, Gleason was “a great presence ... we looked to him for guidance ... he was our encyclopedia”.⁴

Wenner was also influenced by a British music paper called *Melody Maker*. *Melody Maker* was originally a jazz publication that started covering rock music in 1964. In a Scandinavian study on the music press called *Amusers, Bruisers & Cool-Headed Cruisers*, the authors explain that “the young rock critics hired at *Melody Maker* were influenced by the journalistic standard and musical knowledge of jazz critics at the publication”, and started writing critically about rock music in a way that had not been attempted in earlier ‘fan’ or ‘trade’ magazines, borrowing from jazz critics’ criteria of musical technique, expressive ability, authenticity, and so on.⁵

Having spent time in London during the summer of 1966, Wenner was impressed by *Melody Maker*, and although its editors rejected his attempt to do freelance work for the magazine while he was there, he maintained contact with the staff. In the early issues of *Rolling Stone*, Wenner actually reproduced articles from *Melody Maker* and initiated an agreement to trade advertisements, where *Melody Maker* would run ads for *Rolling Stone* subscriptions and vice versa. I learned from Dan Morgenstern that Wenner had approached *Down Beat* to do a similar ad exchange; Morgenstern thought this was a great idea, but the owner John Maher was against it, and Morgenstern never heard from Wenner again.

Unlike teen idol magazines like *Hit Parader*, Wenner aimed to provide professional reportage and intelligent analysis of a music scene, and unlike early rock fanzines like *Crawdaddy!* and *Mojo-Navigator*, he was determined to turn *Rolling Stone* into a commercially viable enterprise. In both of these respects, the successful format of music magazines like *Down Beat* and *Melody Maker* were important models for the early *Rolling Stone*.

A DIVERSITY OF JAZZ-ROCK AESTHETICS

Throughout 1968 and 1969, *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone* each represented a wide range of opinions as they covered the interplay between jazz and rock culture. In *Rolling Stone*, artists like vibist Gary Burton and guitarist Gabor Szabo were quoted in interview as wanting to get rid of labels such as jazz and rock, because neither were appropriate to the new kind of music being made. Ralph Gleason was declaring that “the rock bands are really jazz bands; the guitar soloists ... are really jazz soloists,” much to the protestation of some of his former *Down Beat* colleagues like Leonard Feather. At *Down Beat*, Alan Heineman was going wild for the increasingly complex work of artists like Zappa, Cream, and Hendrix, while at *Rolling Stone* Jon Landau complained that rock was

⁴ Draper 98.

⁵ Ulf Lindberg, Gestur Guomundsson, Morten Michelsen, Hans Weisethaunet, 2000, 89.

becoming too cerebral and losing the qualities of physicality and simplicity that had made it such a refreshing departure from jazz in the first place.

Lester Bangs made his rock criticism debut at Rolling Stone, and quickly developed a unique jazz-rock aesthetic that drew connections between the likes of Miles Davis, Captain Beefheart, Tony Williams, and the Velvet Underground. On Beefheart's Trout Mask Replica, he wrote "the music truly meshes, flows, and excites in a way that almost none of the self-conscious, carefully crafted jazz-rock bullshit of the past year has done".⁶ He raved about Miles Davis's *In A Silent Way*: "All at once, it owes almost as much to the techniques developed by rock improvisers in the last four years as to Davis' jazz background. It is part of a transcendental new music which flushes categories away".⁷ Bangs' notion of transcendental music may not stand up to critical scrutiny, but what strikingly remains is the way in which he and other critics looked to the future of music with a great sense of openness, optimism, and possibility, with an ideological perspective that celebrated the fact that music history had yet to be written.

JAZZ-ROCK INTERACTIONS: 1969-1970

** I'll play for you now a short clip from the Tony Williams Lifetime group, which included organist Larry Young and guitarist John McLaughlin, all of whom were heavily influenced by rock as well as jazz, and all of whom had jammed with Jimi Hendrix at different points, but not put down any definitive recordings. This is an excerpt from a song called "Emergency." Note McLaughlin especially, whose soloistic approach blends jazz improvisation with distorted guitar tones.

ROLLING STONE AND AVANT-GARDE JAZZ-ROCK

An even more significant figure at Rolling Stone was John Burks, whom Jann Wenner lured from a position at Newsweek to become the managing editor of Rolling Stone in October 1968. Unlike Wenner, Burks was a jazz fan and came at the recommendation of Ralph Gleason. He was hired to increase the standards of Rolling Stone's reporting, but his personal tastes in music also influenced the content of the magazine. At this point Wenner was increasingly spending time away from San Francisco where Rolling Stone was based. When asked by a staff member why he started the magazine, Wenner had once responded "so I could meet John Lennon", and 1969 was the year that Wenner began to reap the rewards of his newfound celebrity status within the rock world, and consequently spent much of his time in New York and London with the stars his magazine covered.

All this time away from San Francisco meant that Burks was left with a large amount of autonomy in editorial decisions. Unsurprisingly, 1969 marks a high point for the amount of jazz coverage in the magazine; this is partly due of course, to the emerging jazz-rock fusion scene, but Burks's influence is also clear, as he wrote much of the jazz content himself. Burks oversaw cover stories on relatively obscure musicians experimenting with

⁶ 26 July 1969, 37.

⁷ 15 November 1969, 33.

avant garde jazz and rock, including Sun Ra and Captain Beefheart. Burks would also have been working alongside Greil Marcus, who hired freelancers including several well-known writers from Down Beat, like Pete Welding and Michael Zwerin. Such cross-over in writers working for both Down Beat and Rolling Stone is interesting because it clearly demonstrates that the worlds of jazz and rock criticism, both at the discursive and the professional level, were not as mutually exclusive as we might assume.

THE MILES DAVIS COVER

The most outstanding example of this kind of overlap is a cover story Rolling Stone did on Miles Davis at the end of 1969, just between the release of *In A Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*. The feature includes a series of photographs taken of Miles working out at the boxing ring, and an interview conducted by Don DeMichael, the former editor of Down Beat before Morgenstern took over. I was especially amazed to discover that in that same week, Down Beat also ran a cover story on Miles Davis, also interviewed at the boxing ring by Don DeMichael. Although the two articles are different—the Rolling Stone version focuses more on Miles' views about race and music, while the Down Beat version mainly discusses Miles' passion for boxing—the two stories are clearly based on the same interview.

CONCLUSIONS

John Burks resigned as managing editor in June 1970 after a major fallout with Wenner, whom Burks felt was leading the magazine in an politically and musically conservative direction. The struggle for authority between Wenner and Burks led to a mutiny at the magazine, and Burks ended up taking over half of Wenner's staff with him out the door. Meanwhile, Down Beat was forced to give up its title as America's biggest selling music magazine, having been overtaken by Rolling Stone by 1970.

I feel this story is interesting for several reasons. First, despite us traditionally thinking that jazz-rock fusion began around 1970, we see that jazz and rock were audibly influencing one another much earlier, and that most of the debates in the music press about the integration between jazz and rock took place in the years leading up to 1970, rather than afterwards. Second, there is not one single authoritative version of these events, not even two versions divided between Down Beat's jazz bias and Rolling Stone's rock bias, but instead many different, conflicting accounts and aesthetics expressed by individuals working in those magazines at the time. The discourse in these two magazines turned out the way it did due to circumstances within the magazines which were often unrelated to the dominant views of the culture or even the music being made: accounting and advertising decisions, as well friendships and conflicts between the staff at the magazines all played a part.

Such historical particularities get wiped out over time as we try to construct a coherent narrative of music history. Scott DeVeaux puts this another way by paraphrasing Ralph Ellison: "each new [music history] textbook dulls our sensibilities, 'retells the stories as they have been told and written ... made neat and smooth, with all the incomprehensible

details vanished along with most of the wonder”⁸. What I’m trying to in my research is go back to jazz and rock criticism to see how the coverage of music as it was unfolding compares to the accepted narrative of music history we are now given. By researching the particularities of the rise and relationship of jazz and rock criticism in the past, we can hopefully create a more diverse, less monolithic understanding of what jazz and rock can and should mean to us in the present.

⁸ DeVaux 553.