

Do we still need rock journalists?

The histories, values and prospects of writing about rock music

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We might consider rock journalism as a profession in crisis, with its journalists writing about a music industry that is itself in crisis. In a culture where downloads are threatening the primacy of the album and where fans use blogging to make their voices heard as loudly as those of professional journalists, what can rock journalists still offer us? Moreover, what does it mean to be a rock journalist in the twenty-first century? Rock music in the late 1960s was considered a counter-cultural force, a home for authentic self-expression. One history of rock journalism mirrors rock music's key features, with rock writers also seeking to become self-expressive spokespeople for their generation, their values emulating those of the musicians they admired. Since that time, we have seen rock music fragmenting into a dizzying array of genres and sub-genres (heavy metal, speed metal, grindcore, avant-rock and so on). The rock press has responded to this by an increase in specialist magazines, though at the same time rock music has also become a fixture in our daily newspapers.

This keynote speech will explore the varied histories of rock journalism, what it represents and how it has been practised. Most importantly, it will examine the cultural and economic status of rock journalism in the twentieth-first century. A recent article in *Classic Rock* magazine asked the question: Is 'rock' a four-letter word? The occasion for this question was the removal of the word 'rock' from the name of a UK radio station by its owners, who argued that the term was no longer attractive to advertisers. Such a decision raises important questions not only about the economic status of rock music, but also its continued cultural significance. It also provides a contemporary context in which to examine the cultural significance of rock journalists. What does it mean to be a rock journalist in a world that appears very different from that where rock first appeared? Is the rock journalist now only one small voice among many? In a world where technology can be used as a short-cut between artist and audience, do professional rock music media still have a place? In short, do we still need rock journalists?