

REVIEW ESSAY

Rocktimism?: Pop Music Writing in the Age of Rock Criticism

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Chuck Eddy. *Rock and Roll Always Forgets: A Quarter Century of Music Criticism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011.

Robert Palmer. *Blues and Chaos: The Music Writing of Robert Palmer*. Edited by Anthony DeCurtis. New York: Scribners, 2009.

Ellen Willis. *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music*. Edited by Nona Willis Aronowitz, foreword by Sasha Frere-Jones, afterword by Daphne Carr and Evie Nagy. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011.

Rock criticism is dead; long live rock criticism!

During the 2000s, influential pop music writers such as Kelefa Sanneh and Sasha Frere-Jones revived the putdown “rockist” to turn a critical lens on contemporary pop music criticism. First used by 1980s post-punk advocates in England, the concept of “rockism” named what these anti-rockists argued were outmoded aesthetic and ideological criteria for the analysis of popular music: sincerity, anticommercialism, rawness, and the rock shibboleth of “keeping it real.” They wanted critics to stop treating non-rock genres by these evaluative norms. At best, they believed that rockism sidelined other kinds of popular music as “guilty pleasures”; at worst, it was downright exclusionary and prejudiced. Moreover, by the 2000s, rock was no longer the dominant form of popular music it had been, so why, Sanneh et al. wondered, did its ideals and values still hold sway? These so-called “poptimists” argued that it was well past time to start exploring a broader range of pop music genres on their own terms, particularly as they came into view in the shadows of rock’s fading spotlight.¹

The re-emergence of rockism as a controversial issue in the 2000s reflected larger shifts in the pop music marketplace and soundscape. Between roughly 1980 and 2000, rock moved from being *the* primary commercial

and cultural style to being just another genre in the pop soundscape. These changes accompanied dramatic shifts in technologies of production and distribution within the pop music business. By the 2000s, a burning question for critics was how they should respond to the end of the reign of rock. The idea of rockism provided one answer. British musician Pete Wylie coined the term in the early 1980s, when rock still dominated the charts. He used it as a humorous, tongue-in-cheek attempt to expand the pop canon: for instance, he pushed for a Race Against Rockism campaign, a twist on the Rock Against Racism effort then underway in the United Kingdom. Critics such as Paul Morley took up the idea of rockism to critique the pretensions of aging rockers and the laziness of critics and audiences who accepted their pompous seriousness as the only worthy mode of pop music-making.² But by the time the concept reappeared in the American press, some twenty-five years later, it was not just a witty call for more inclusivity; it had become a deadly serious indictment.

This was because the recent protestations against rockism were about more than just taste. Poptimists accused rockist critics of reasserting troubling assumptions about gender, class, and especially race in popular music. Rockism, they claimed, was the continuation in subtle—and sometimes glaring—ways of the racism and homophobia found, for example, in the Disco Sucks phenomenon of the 1970s; the sexist, and sometimes outright misogynist, dismissals of pop divas; and the dismissals of the persistent attraction to the machinery and spectacle of the music industry among poor, working-class, and disenfranchised populations.

Poptimists of the 2000s did not seek merely to burst the bubble of rock's pretensions to art, as Wylie and Morley had done in the early 1980s—and as, before them, a writer such as Nik Cohn had done at the very inception of pop music criticism in the late 1960s, with his *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: Pop From the Beginning* (published in England in 1969 and reprinted, confusingly if perhaps fittingly, with the subtitle *Rock From the Beginning* in the United States in 1970).³ Rather, poptimists wished to reimagine the very framework for writing about pop in the post-rock era. They wanted to get away from what became *de facto* celebrations of a narrow group of primarily white, male guitar players performing primarily for white, male, middle-class fans. Instead, they called for a turn toward a wider spectrum of musicians and audiences. They wished to leave behind the accompanying obsession with authenticity, seriousness, depth, artistic autonomy, rebelliousness, integrity, and “keeping it real” found in rockism; instead, they would focus on the performative, artificial, synthetic, surface,

spectacular, and mass-produced qualities of pop music making as it actually existed by the 2000s. They wanted to displace the 1960s and 1970s as the apex of popular music artistry and to rethink the very narrative of popular music history.

Theirs was a powerful, captivating critique, but as Nik Cohn's aforementioned book indicates, it missed a long-running dialogue about the aesthetics and ideologies of rock, on the one hand, and those of pop, on the other hand, which had preoccupied many critics from the inception of pop music writing in the 1960s and 1970s. Three recent compilations of essays, reviews, and articles from the heyday of rock—by Ellen Willis, Robert Palmer, and Chuck Eddy—offer an opportunity to trace the history of these tensions. All three collections have a retrospective quality. *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music* and *Blues and Chaos: The Music Writing of Robert Palmer* were assembled posthumously either by or at the behest of the critics' children. Willis died in 2006, and Palmer in 1997. Eddy's book plays up its own historical nature too. Even though the book is called *Rock and Roll Always Forgets*, a rephrasing of the Bob Seger song about rock's lasting power, the subtitle—*A Quarter Century of Music Criticism*—belies the title's conceit.

Serving as a kind of primary source archive that begins in the late 1960s, when rock emerged as the predominant form of commercially marketed music in the West, and that continues into our current moment, when rock has become just one of many genres, the three books complicate simplistic narratives of rockism giving way to popitism. They demonstrate that from the inception of pop music criticism, its practitioners have been obsessed with the relationship between artifice and art, between taking music—rock or pop—seriously with one ear and enjoying the artistry of its sheer superficiality with the other. If these three books can serve as representative examples of rock criticism, then it turns out that the popitist challenge to rockist assumptions was built into the very rise of rock criticism itself. First generation rock critics such as Ellen Willis wanted to grasp how mass-marketed, mass-consumed, hyper-commodified music could also have surprising elements of anti-commercial, *auteur*-made, and vernacular-born creativity buried within it or floating across its surfaces. So too, they sought out the political dimensions of pop music in relation to its ambiguous status as both commerce and culture, commodity form and art form. Palmer and Eddy's writing shows that this framework shaped all subsequent pop music writing.

Ellen Willis wrote one of the foundational essays of pop music criticism, about Bob Dylan, before becoming the first pop music critic for

the *New Yorker* in 1968. The essay, first published in the highbrow journal *Commentary* in 1967 and then expanded for the short-lived mass-market magazine *Cheetah* one year later, pooptimistically embraced the onetime folk musician's turn to the surfaces of celebrity and image. In the *New Yorker*, Willis continued this line of pop art exploration until, in the mid-1970s, she abandoned music writing for other subjects of cultural critique and reportage. Collected for the first time, Willis's essays reveal how her work was a key part of the robust conversation about pop and art that rock criticism generated in its heyday.

The conflation of rock and pop criticism as one and the same thing, which poptimists bemoan, turns up right away in the Willis book. The book's subtitle is *Ellen Willis on Rock Music* but in his foreword, current *New Yorker* music critic Sasha Frere-Jones refers to Willis's "pop criticism." The ambiguities continue throughout. They show how Willis shaped pop music writing as a whole even though she concentrated mostly on the rock genre. She linked the question of rock's commercial and artistic dimensions to larger questions of popular culture, and particularly to the relationship between the personal and the public. A founding member of the Redstockings, an organization of radical second-wave feminist activists in New York City, Willis thought of herself as focusing on "the bloody crossroads where rock and feminism meet" (160). As a feminist, she was interested in how the personal was political, and discovered in rock a way to think about this dynamic through pop music, which itself connected intimate experiences to widely shared public dilemmas.

In essays on Bob Dylan, Lou Reed & The Velvet Underground, Janis Joplin, Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Sex Pistols, and other rock performers, Willis argued that rock music had to be understood as a mix of musical innovation and pop-cultural intervention. "The great sixties superstars did not make the pantheon on the strength of their music alone; they or, rather, their public images, were also aesthetic objects," she argued (Willis 123). The surface mattered, even for the rockers who kept it real. She admired Dylan, Reed and the Velvets, and Joplin for the ways in which they navigated the art/commerce binary. Dylan did so by drawing upon folk music's attention to detail in order to make sense of the striking cultural surfaces of a mass-mediated world. Reed and the Velvets did so by drawing upon the narrow aesthetic constraints of rock 'n' roll to explore vulnerability and spiritual transcendence in a world dominated by cynicism and doubt. Joplin, who for Willis died trying to find her way as a female performer in the rock world, was "not so much a victim as

a casualty” of the struggle to find the balance between artistic truth and commercial success (130).

While Dylan, Reed, and Joplin were heroes for Willis, Elvis Presley, the Stones, Creedence, and the Sex Pistols were foils: they were musicians whose attitudes and personae were not inspirations so much as problems to confront. Presley’s seeming abandonment of his rock ’n’ roll origins for pop superstardom, the sexism of the Stones and Pistols, and the earnestness of Creedence leader John Fogerty forced Willis to come to terms with her personal relationship to the power of rock music as both art and pop. She wrote about these performers precisely because they used the marketplace of pop to establish a special relationship between audience and musician. She believed that “Rock and roll happens between fans and stars, rather than between listeners and musicians” (Willis 77). The music was best when it allowed a critic to explore fantastical projections across the line between audience and performer. But, for Willis, in the end, rock and roll also had to be “real.” To her, even in a world of pop surfaces and superficial pleasures, realness was ultimately “the only fantasy that counts” (Willis 41).

Keeping it real as the ultimate fantasy: for Willis, rock was the most important genre precisely because it was the most contradictory form of pop music. At once art and commerce, culture and commodity, it was a powerful means to try to make sense of how public representations might be connected to personal struggles. Rock, Willis noted, was at once a distant, mass cultural phenomenon and a way to take stock of intimate immediate questions. It was a kind of mirror (The Velvet Underground’s “I’ll Be Your Mirror” was one of her favorite songs and Willis often evaluated music by dancing to it in front of a mirror in her apartment), helping her to explore how the personal pleasures of consumption and entertainment related to public issues of aesthetic understanding and political liberation. For Willis, rock, experienced within the realm of consumer capitalism, could potentially even lead to an anticapitalist politics. “The impulse to buy a new car and tool down the freeway with the radio blasting rock and roll,” she wrote in 1981, “is not unconnected to the impulse to fuck outside marriage, get high, stand up to men or white people or bosses, [or] join dissident movements” (Willis 221). Rockist transcendence and political resistance could travel the road of pop optimism. The sheer pleasure of speeding down the highway with rock music on the radio had more to it than first hit the ear. Listening in not only to the music itself, but to its reception, Willis never entirely let go of rockist dreams, but she always tried to tune in deeper musical meaning by fiddling with the dials of seemingly superficial pop experience. Rock was important

for Willis because it was pop music—commercial, crass, and sometimes frustratingly retrograde and reactionary, but also a way to question, wonder, and feel differently about life.

If Willis, as one of the originators of rock criticism, demonstrated how the genre was at once rockist and popoptimistic in its inception, then the work of Robert Palmer, who died in 1997, offers a different historical perspective on contemporary debates about pop music writing. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1945, Palmer was four years younger than Willis, but also of the same generation to witness the exciting rise of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s. A saxophonist in R&B bands as a teenager, Palmer went on to become a member of the psychedelic group The Insect Trust. In the 1970s, he wrote for *Rolling Stone* and other publications, and in the 1980s, he served as the chief pop music critic for the *New York Times*. Palmer was the chief consultant for a BBC/PBS history of rock music in 1995. He seems to be a rockist if there ever was one. Yet, Palmer's attention to a wide range of musical genres and his interest in understanding musical creativity prior to its commodification complicate what rockism means.

Whereas Willis concentrated on the proto-politics of musical consumption, inviting readers to join her in contemplating how the experience of a recording, a concert, or a performer's persona affected her, Palmer reported from the spaces in which the sounds of pop were first produced: recording studios, local neighborhood bars, juke joints, record company offices, backstage dressing rooms, radio stations, tour buses, sitting around kitchen tables, and others. Because Palmer wrote about a broad range of genres—blues, jazz, classical, and what would become known as world music—and because he was most curious about musical creation, his interest in authenticity was not in the service of turning rock stars into mythical heroes, but rather in capturing the strange, surprising journeys of musicians through the machinery of pop music making from its precommercial contexts to its technological settings to its mass-marketed effects.

In his writing, Palmer constantly revealed little pieces of information that in their oddball, strangeness deeply illuminated a particular musician's practice. Such tidbits became vehicles of revelation about the larger social fabric of pop music culture. Did you know, for instance, that bluesman Muddy Waters's first instrument was the accordion, that Bo Diddley's was the violin (on which he learned European orchestral music in Chicago's Ebenezer Baptist Church), that Jerry Lee Lewis once shot his bass player, that Stax drummer Al Jackson, Jr., often vacationed in Jamaica and incorporated the island's rhythms into the soul music that he was helping to produce

in Memphis (which, in turn, heavily influenced many emerging Jamaican musicians), and that the hard-pounding Led Zeppelin drummer Jon Bonham loved not only James Brown, but also soft rock by Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young? Did you know that the Isley Brothers got their first recording contract from a chance meeting on a Greyhound bus on the way to New York City, and that Yoko Ono grew up in Scarsdale once her family moved to the United States from Japan after World War II? Did you know that as a singer, Waters was particularly adept not only at flatted thirds but also the somewhat less common blues sound of flatted fifths, whereas Sam Cooke's distinctive vocal style came from his emphasis on singing sixths rather than the more classic flatted blue notes?

There are endless small but telling details such as these in Palmer's book. They are the building blocks of his effort to picture popular music as something wild, unruly, and "nonproprietary" (Palmer 2). Palmer was certainly most interested in popular music as something more than just the glossy sheen of its pop surfaces. But he was not intent on limiting, excluding, or constraining music. At least in the essays selected by fellow rock critic Anthony DeCurtis for *Blues and Chaos*, there is an openness of spirit to Palmer's aesthetic judgment, an interest in music that cultivates unruly restlessness and that rebels against constraints rather than enforces norms and boundaries. Palmer liked music that came from a place of turbulence and disquietude. He was drawn to the great art-making of Miles Davis, John Lennon, Ray Charles, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, producer Sam Phillips, the Master Musicians of Jajouka, minimalist composer LaMonte Young, and bluesman R. L. Burnside not only because he considered them geniuses, but also because they were connoisseurs of "chaos," practitioners of music that defied expectations (Palmer 19–20). If this is rockism, then it has more to offer than pop optimists claim. Palmer's criticism, so grounded in his effective reportage and his eagerness for adventure, seems to open up, not close down, the possibilities of musical creativity and its evaluation by critics.

Chuck Eddy was born half a generation after Willis and Palmer, and his work provides an opportunity to see how Willis and Palmer's critical styles played out during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Eddy's reviews and essays for *Creem*, the *Village Voice*, *Spin*, and countless other pop music outlets combine aspects of Willis and Palmer's writing. The tidbit reappears in Eddy's writing, but rather than as Palmerian reportage from the world of musical production, it emerges as a series of dizzying cross-references plucked from Eddy's wide-ranging listening habits. He seems to have heard almost everything—rock, jazz, hip hop, metal, country, folk, pop both

obscure and mainstream—and he often writes about the unlikely connections between his disparate sources. Yet, Eddy is not concerned with how these small details suggest a world of vernacular music outside the market. Unlike Palmer, he writes entirely from within the consumer experience. In this way, he recalls Willis's interest in developing an aesthetics and politics of critical musical reception.

Eddy might be understood as the ultimate pop optimist. He seems to have little interest in anything but the superficial surfaces of pop culture. "We need pop for the present, not for posterity," he proclaimed in a 1988 review of two now-forgotten Eurodisco records (Eddy 253). For him, pop music's redeeming value is that it does not claim to have any redeeming value. "We've fucked everything up, and it's too late to turn back," he argued in the same review (Eddy 253). But despite seeming to embrace pop optimism at its most extreme, Eddy cannot quite get comfortable with letting go of the rockist dream of pop music as potential artistic and political liberation. This desire haunts his writing, driving him toward bleakness and despair, and even anger and frustration. Rather than be labeled a pop optimist, Eddy might best be called a pop optimisanthrope.

Eddy writes in a style reminiscent of the late Lester Bangs, editor and influential writer at *Creem* magazine in the 1970s. Like Bangs, Eddy adopts a mock-histrionic tone of desperation, an idiom whose pleasures are to be found in its depressed, sardonic vexations about the futility of both rockist and pop optimist ideals. There is no transcendence here, but there is a kind of fun to be had in the very exasperation that no transcendence can be found in pop. This makes for a kind of *Mad* magazine-inspired anti-critical criticism. Even in that one short Eurodisco review, Eddy backs away from a pop optimistic conclusion: "I'm left wondering how actual human beings could stoop to such blankness." He then adds parenthetically, "(Not to mention: Who *buys* this garbage, anyway?)" (Eddy 252). But in a very Bangsian move, he whiplashes the reader back against this seemingly rockist critical judgment. "These records are vacuous, contrived, and redundant. But to fling that adjectival triumvirate at *any* pop mode these days is to tautologize" (252). Ultimately, Eddy admires the music's integrity precisely as music that lacks integrity. "Unlike vacuously contrived redundancies from Springsteen to Savage Republic," he decides, "true disco (as opposed to some tepid-by-both-catharsis-and-get-down-terms art-placebo) has no aesthetic delusions, so it's free to be free" (252).

This is twisted logic indeed: pop music that is slave to its own pointlessness is in fact liberating. Eddy's whipsaw prose edges toward nihilism at

times, but ultimately he turns away from the abyss by taking pleasure in his own back-and-forth, labyrinthine reasoning. Suspicious of any kind of music that might be an “art-placebo,” Eddy comes up with a new critical take on pop music’s significance at the end of his Eurodisco review. “If music’s gonna matter anymore,” he argues, “it’s gotta buck *all* tradition, including the worn-out tradition-of-bucking tradition” (253). For Eddy, “protesting history at this point is no less a limitation than being in legion with it” (253). But then, just as quickly, Eddy once again undercuts even the stability of this optimistic conclusion. He concludes with a sly rhetorical question (once again in the whispered admission of a parenthetical aside): “(Or, in other words, I’ve *sold out*, okay?)” (Eddy 253). By the end of this roller coaster of aesthetic judgment, one is not quite sure what Eddy believes, and that seems to be the point: his writing creates a mood of disturbed and spirited uncertainty.

This creates a kind of no-way-out feeling to Eddy’s reviews at times, a claustrophobic fear of straightforward argumentation, but within the compression of contrary opinions, or perhaps because of it, an energy also emerges. Whether he is writing about Nirvana or Def Leppard, Teena Maria or Radiohead, Emmett Miller or Vanilla Ice, Debbie Gibson or Michael Jackson, the Pet Shop Boys or mainstream country stars Montgomery Gentry, Chely Wright, and Toby Keith, Eddy takes seriously the possibilities for pop to mean something—even if one must frantically feint left and right to access this meaning. We have come a long way from Ellen Willis’s fairly direct utopian political hopes for rock as a form of pop art engagement. “PROPER POLITICS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH DECENT ROCK MUSIC,” Eddy argued in all caps in a 1987 *Creem Metal* review of the band The Mentors, and he sticks to this position throughout his writing (107). And yet the politics of pop as art lurk in Eddy’s oeuvre. In *Rock and Roll Always Forgets*, it appears most strikingly in the introductory sections written for each chapter. One almost wishes that these sections formed the basis of a book of their own. In them, Eddy strikes a new tone, more thoughtful and contemplative than glib and angry, as he ponders his relationship to his children, to his career, and to pop music itself. In the introductory parts of the book, he also refers to his own coming of age story, a fascinating tale that is directly connected to his relationship with music. Both his parents died when he was young, and his stepfather abandoned the family, which left him orphaned, after which he enrolled in the US military. Then, somewhat by accident, he became a rock critic. Eddy does not present his biography as a sob story, but rather to demonstrate the power of music to matter in

the context of struggle and suffering, occasional triumphs, and continued survival.

When he turns to his own story, or when he uses the music and careers of fellow Detroiters Kid Rock and Eminem as proxies, Eddy's writing moves to a level of profundity generally absent from the shrill, mock-tortured, hipster tone that sometimes dominates his reviews. "Ever wonder why people are so determined to reach for white picket fences, supposed normalcy, a nuclear family?" he asks in a masterful essay on Eminem's public presentations of his domestic life, "Well, try growing up without one" (Eddy 205). When his son, aged eleven, remarks that, "Eminem makes being a dad sound *hard!*," it leads Eddy into an extended rumination on the tensions between Eminem's presentations of his own wild, destructive childhood and his efforts to raise his own daughter differently (205). The tightly wound self-suspicion of Eddy's writing eases in these moments, and a wiser, more reflective style appears, one that illuminates the music's significance both to Eddy and to his readers. In these sections of the book, as in the best parts of Willis's and Palmer's criticism, debates about rockism and popmism seem beside the point.

Today, as both the music industry and the journalism business undergo dramatic structural transformations (not to mention the changes in academia, in which popular music studies have increasingly found a home), reading back over how pop music criticism developed during the age of rock provides a useful framework for grappling with the stakes of contemporary pop music criticism. In the collections of writing by Willis, Palmer, and Eddy, there remains the sense that when music matters—even, in Eddy's case, by sometimes not mattering—the lines between the pop surface and deeper levels of vernacular and aesthetic experience grow porous. Something else emerges in place of rockism or popmism. There are not just snap judgments, taste cultures, and negotiations of cultural capital, as certain scholars of rock criticism contend. There is also the cultural, political, and even moral worth of simply listening intently to other people intently listening.

Notes

1. See Kelefa Sanneh, "The Rap Against Rockism," *New York Times* 31 Oct. 2004 [<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/31sann.html>, accessed 30 June 2012]; Sasha Frere-Jones, "When Critics Meet Pop: Why Are Some

Writers So Afraid of Justin Timberlake,” *Slate Magazine* 22 Aug. 2003, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2003/08/when_critics_meet_pop.html, accessed 30 June 2012]; and David Carr’s report on the unlikely rockist controversy over Stephin Merritt of the Magnetic Fields, “One Man’s Musical Taste as Fodder for a Flame War,” *New York Times* 18 May 2006 [<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/18/arts/music/18rock.html>, accessed 30 June 2012].

2. See Morley’s “Rockism—It’s the New Rockism,” *Guardian* 25 May 2006.

3. Nik Cohn, *Pop From the Beginning* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), reprinted the next year as *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: Pop From the Beginning* in the United Kingdom and in the United States as *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: Rock From the Beginning* (St. Albans, UK: Paladin, 1970). Later republished as *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: The Golden Age of Rock* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).