

\$ 100

THE ROCK CRITICAL LIST

"Squirming in a box marked 'Fucked' since 1998"

SO WHATCHASAYIN'?

Always the punk-ass and never the punk, "criticism" barely bustles a hedgerow anymore. Grown-ups, exhausted from thinking about how much they hate their tiny lives, are content with just-the-facts-ma'am multiple-choice: a) Lauryn Hill; b) Saving Private Ryan; c) Star Wars: Behind the Magic; or d) the new Mac Powerbook G3 (stop now, it's a monitor-freezing piece of shit). The "youth market" is too hormone-sozzled and passionately fickle to appreciate anything past a moony, quote-stuffed feature about why [insert brain-drained artiste] is the greatest thing since peanut butter and jelly in the same jar; or a glib, cheap-shot-riddled rant about why [insert brain-drained artiste] is now a sell-out fraud. And this holds true for all criticism, not just music, but TV, film, art, theater, books (if anybody thinks they're above the muck, they're in grad-school denial). Face it, nobody really gives a web-surfing fuck, least of all the bedraggled editorial staffs of national publications, who huddle in fear of OSHA-violating bacillus, their HMOs more of a Byzantine death-trap than the toys section at Wal-Mart.

As a "veteran" (i.e., decrepit and disillusioned) music scribbler, I can assure you that music criticism, like all criticism, has, more often than not, sucked the ass of a lubricated goat (ever try to read CRAW-DADDY?). Geek godhead Lester Bangs wrote just as many unbearably shitty reviews as Dan "Headphones" Aquilante, Robert Hilburn, and Bill Wyman combined (Why? Because he couldn't fake it for cash, and when he tried, he was abysmal). Back in the '60s or '70s or '80s, there were VERY few shmucks who were trying anything remotely, honestly nervy. Most who did--Bangs, LeRoi Jones, Nick Tosches, Ellen Willis, R. Meltzer, Charles M. Young, Greg Tate, Chuck Eddy, dream hampton, RJ Smith, Frank Kogan, Rob Sheffield, Danyel Smith--burned/cashed out or started phoning it in. Obviously, there were times when the early-'90s VILLAGE VOICE music section under Joe Levy was better than it ever was under O.G. Robert Christgau, and there were times under Eric Weisbard and Evelyn McDonnell during the rest of the '90s when it was eight million times worse than Christgau in a zouk-induced coma. This shit goes in cycles. From 1996-1998, the hip-hop/indie-rock zine EGO TRIP was the only U.S. rag with anything smartly real (or unreal) to say about the shifting sandbox of pop cool (even though its reviews were often lite-FM snooze alarms); but just as it really got clocking, editors Sacha Jenkins, Elliott Wilson and Jeff Mao bailed to get their scrilla-fill at THE SOURCE

and VIBE. These days, all three churn out punchless, above-average assessments of music they used to hilariously fight about (there's talk of an EGO TRIP album; whoopee). All you can really be sure of in this world is that the NEW YORK PRESS will be a bad freshman-dorm-room joke that goes on for four endless years, and that Jim DeRogatis will remain a fat bitter fuck who thinks he deserves a lifetime free-lunch because he once dissed Hootie and the Blowfish in ROLLING STONE.

Obviously, nobody gets laid, hosts an MTV segment, or signs a boffo book deal (the holy trinity--psyche!) from writing top-notch music criticism. The whole damn enterprise is about as sexually charged as a clarinet player in a high school marching band, but here we are, and even if we're NOT better than all this, we should at least be trying a damn sight harder. Sadly, with more and more publications willing to fly cheery hacks like Matt Diehl/Toure out to the Hotel Nikko to entwine poolside pinkies with, say, Pras or Janeane Garofalo, potentially aspiring "critics" understandably slump against their Heineken-stained futons and wonder, "What the fuck! If that slut is getting paid and laid, why am I eating Kraft mac-and-cheese in Reseda?!" Why should anyone, for instance, actually take the time to call out Jay-Z on his deadeningly smug diction, lowest-common-denomination worldview, and cheeseball, flossed-off music, when you can make twice as much scratch yakking to Canibus about UFOs and shit? Or piping pimpish "reviews" in on-line anonymity? Or giggling through the liner notes for Rhino's collected works of Biz Markie? Or developing a hip hop coming-of-age screenplay?

Why?

Because pop music is still the most blessedly blasphemous American art form being sold down the river, and should be inspiring writing of at least equally sloppy satori. For instance, it should be obvious by now that getting emotionally wrought up in social contexts both trite and tragic, while necessary, just ain't good enough, especially in the case of hip hop; and it should also be obvious that dizzily rapturing on and on and on about how sonics/rhythms render lyrics/history irrelevant, while an easy way to get a book published, is doubly unsatisfying. The no-shit! goal should be to incorporate the two, and then and only then will any of us reflect anything that approaches truth or reality or poetry or MUSIC!!!!!!

1998's TOP TEN LIST

1. **Neil Strauss** (NEW YORK TIMES, ROLLING STONE, SPIN). No writer better exemplifies music criticism's pathetic, post-alternative slide into irrelevance than this balding, dickless imp. Always an obvious thinker and clunky stylist with shaky-at-best tastes, Strauss once got over on enthusiasm and pluckiness (i.e., he listened to lots of records and interviewed lots of folks). But these virtues only get you so far, so your ol' pal Neil decided to develop some vices--namely, a taste for schmoozy self mythology, including dumb wigs, a stand-up comedy "act," and an open flaunting of his female "friends" (which he wasn't really fucking, but hey, who could be sure?). His writing quickly abandoned any pretense to reporting or insight, turning to the more pressing question of how the artist felt about NEIL! Was Neil bright, cute, or witty? Had the artist heard about the rare vinyl that Neil just discovered on a press junket to [fill in city]? Did the artist know that Neil breakdances? But trying to snicker under your breath 24 hours a day is a grueling job, particularly when you're supposed to be producing a weekly column for the TIMES, and eventually, Strauss crumbled. In the past two years or so, via his DAMN YANKEES floor show with Marilyn Manson, and most recently, his goo-goo-ga-ga bedroom session with Jewel for ROLLING STONE (welcome to the nadir of '90s music journalism), Strauss has become the most craven, punch-drunk phony in the business. Giddy publicists think he's just so cuddly, and really intelligent, despite all the, you know, bullshit. Artists can't wait to get a gulp of his thin, drooling Q&As. Young writers stare in awe of his best-seller status, lofty pulpit, and unlimited free records. Meanwhile, Strauss openly rewrites press releases for his "Pop Life" column and counts frequent flyer miles, as the competition (the LOS ANGELES TIMES' Chuck Phillips) mops the floor with his lazy ass. Careful kids, don't let this happen to you.

Rock Critical Quotable: "Yeah, totally...heh heh...like, that really blew me away...uh-huh...heh heh heh...but, yeah, you're, like, a total workhorse, but...I know...well, that's what I was going to ask...uh-huh...yeah, totally...." (Strauss, interviewing Beck on THE MUTATIONS CONVERSATIONS CD, 1998)

2. **Josh Clover/Jane Dark**. (VILLAGE VOICE, SPIN). The only award-winning poet ever to turn to music writing as a cure for menopause, Clover was the rock critical darling of '98, appearing out of nowhere (the

poetry scene) to pen lyrically glittery lead reviews for the VOICE, and later procure a writing contract with SPIN, despite a series of vapid, awkwardly quippy pieces that betrayed his potential talents. Biting from both Frank Kogan (minus the philosophical heart; Clover's zine SUGAR HIGH was a Puffy-esque sample of Kogan's classic WHY MUSIC SUCKS) and Chuck Eddy (minus the obsessively catalogued stylee), this horny, graying brat is the Urge Overkill of music journalism--an enjoyably vampy ironist who too often descends into desperate, amoral starfucking. The faker the better is Clover's suspect credo, and until someone informs him that the joke's not so funny anymore, he'll keep milking it in lamer versions. Extra points off for the most cringeworthy impression of a woman since Vince Vaughan in PSYCHO. Will pay for sex with a Dixie Chick.

Rock Critical Quotable: "Despite what the hardcore Lydonheads would have us believe, little sign that any McLarionettes have cold-rocked a party since parting ways with him." (Clover, incoherently preening, on Malcolm McLaren for "The Svengali Hall of Fame," SPIN Dec. '98)

3. **Joe Levy** (ROLLING STONE). Known for his enormous head, tiny feet and fluid line-editing, Levy was once...oh, who can remember anymore? After fleeing the VOICE for the designer swag of DETAILS, this would-be confidant of Jon Spencer went into a men's room at Spy Bar, flushed his Royal Trux records down the toilet, and became an unabashed, self-righteous propagandist for pop music's ephemeral pleasures. In other words, indie-rock was over, he had a reservation at Union Square Cafe with Elastica, and hey, we're a winner, baby! Now at ROLLING STONE, with Boz Scaggs' son bringing him coffee, he mulls over existential dilemmas such as: Does Sheryl Crow have a boyfriend? Though once a master of balancing his sarcasm with sincerity, Levy now comes off like a morning-radio zookeeper--smirky, self-hating, and wound a little bit too tight. He resents any definition of success but his own, disarming naysayers with a pensive, buffalo-headed nod, followed by a disingenuous leer, "Come on, [fill in name of astonished critic], you know all music's good, just relax and enjoy it!." In the "You Can't Go Home Again" department, his VOICE review of Rancid's latest album featured a key paragraph in which the writer and the boys dined at one of Say It Ain't So Joe's preferred East Village ristorantes, apropos of absolutely nada. Hey Big Spender, we know you can get a table, but can you get a fucking clue? And after years of jocking Mike D's dick to our dismay, Cotton-Eyed Joe managed to place

the Beastie Boys on two ROLLING STONE covers, and then, for a VH-1 promo spot, graced the corridors of publicity firm Nasty Little Man to present the Beasties' Adam Yauch with a ROLLING STONE "music award," adding that Lil' Joe's favoritest group was being honored for "service above and beyond the call of 'booty'." Yock yock, rimshot, fart noise.

Rock Critical Quotable: "Bozo the clown can sing? Who knew!? Who knew?!..." (Levy, grinning like a mental patient about to receive his noontime feeding, on the success of Prodigy's Keith Flint, for an MTV year-end program)

4. **Simon Reynolds** (ex-SPIN, author of GENERATION ECSTASY: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture). Proudly, almost militantly, ignorant of American post-punk and alternative rock, not to mention hip hop, this shaggily taciturn, rave-glazed Englishman somehow managed to helm the record reviews section of SPIN for almost a year. How? Because it was assumed by outsiders and oldsters that Reynolds was the chosen oracle of "electronica," and if anyone held the key to unlocking its Next Big Thingness, it would be Simon Sez. Unfortunately, Reynolds resents any term that he doesn't coin himself, so "electronica," unlike his still-born babies "post-rock" and "neuro-funk," was, per Simon, a tiresome sham by which he refused to be sullied. His editorial imperative boiled down to a dour import column and page after page of hip hop record reviews by an army of aggressively misinformed British fuckheads. On more familiar ground with the release of GENERATION ECSTASY, Reynolds slipped back into his role as heady, raver-rific tour guide--popping Es, worshipping speaker cabinets, and blabbering about post-structuralism. As a history of rave culture, his book is good, clean pretentious fun--an authoritatively info-crammed, Eurocentric fan's notes (though his decision to exclude hip hop entirely is a fatal flaw, he apparently doesn't give a shit). As a cultural manifesto, however, which is how Reynolds would obviously like it to be viewed, GENERATION ECSTASY is a long, beatless slog; its adjective-addled, "post-human" theorizing about the pre-eminence of sensation over identity is repetitive and weak. No writer has ever made dance music seem so hysterically important, yet so impenetrably dull.

5. **Thomas Frank** (HARPER'S, WASHINGTON POST, NATION, BAFFLER, author of CONQUEST OF COOL: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism). Though Frank's lengthy essays demythologizing "The Sixties" and its romanticized life partner, "The

Counterculture," are somewhat admirable, if turgidly written, his music criticism is sentimental, pro forma clap-trap. Still holding a wee torch for the artistically scrappy, "independent" epoch of '80s underground rock (boy, was that paradise!), Frank's basic thesis is this: as evidenced by the co-opting of indie-rock into alternative rock (like the co-opting of punk into new wave, etc.), corporations are now so thoroughly and quickly marketing all aspects of youth culture that music is tainted beyond anything but guilty, "middle-class" pleasure. "Rebellion," as traditionally defined, in "pop music," as traditionally defined, is "dead," as traditionally defined, matter-of-factly proclaims Dr. Frank (hey, close your eyes, and its like Noam Chomsky, if he'd seen Big Black at Maxwells in 1987! Cool!). With today's multimedia complicity, our unequaled economic largesse and '60s-fetish elitism now part of the mainstream, yada yada yada.... Get it? There IS NO UNDERGROUND! Give it up, kids. Your anger and dissatisfaction are meaningless cliches (and if you're black or Latino, we'll get to your hypocritical whining later). For his most asinine throat-clearing to date, Uncle Tom wasted thousands of words in HARPER'S bemoaning the artistic frustrations of University of Chicago bud Chris Holmes (aka Yum-Yum, aka Sabalon Glitz, aka Ashtar Command, etc.), and how his friend's failure to strike musical platinum symbolized the overall Death of Pop Music (Holmes' once "pranked" a major record label by dressing up in a bunny suit and playing sugary pop songs, only to have his genius go unrecognized). Meanwhile, Frank continues to wear his father's ties, but not ironically.

6. **Matt Diehl/Toure** (ANYONE WITH AN EXPENSE-ACCOUNT BUDGET). No matter how you dress 'em up, a bitch iz a bitch iz a bitch.

7. **Robert Christgau** (VILLAGE VOICE). Though I refuse to believe it's an age thing (being decrepit and disillusioned myself), it's notable that Funk Doctor Bob's late-era writing has been tripped up less by his sadly clotted prose and populist autism, than by his total lack of feeling for today's most important youth musics--hip hop and electronic dance; try as he might, the man just has no ear whatsoever for digital beat-science or vernacular poetics. If it ain't got a traditionally defined point of view--left-resistant (Chuck D, KRS-One) or party-hearty (Puffy, Mase), the Dean is left flapping his dentures in the breeze. And his annual Pazz & Jop hand-wringings are case studies in what's all wrong with pop criticism--the need (mostly on the part of aging white guys) to tabulate an officially tidy history of events, a canonical text in which ambivalent/ irrational/comical

passions are viewed as petty typos. That said, the nearly universal critical yawn that greeted the publication of Xgau's long-awaited essay compilation (GROWN UP ALL WRONG) was cowardly and inexcusable. The man may have his head up his pseudo-academic colon, but he deserves a fair hearing, certainly as much as overrated frere Greil "The Nutrageous Professor" Marcus.

8. **Eric Weisbard** (VILLAGE VOICE, SPIN). The Boy Who Wanted to Be Christgau, and then changed his mind. Presently abandoning editing after a tumultuous run at SPIN, and then a rather bland tenure at the VOICE, Weisbard appears to be somewhat humbled these days, or at least less of an arrogant, post-collegiate pinhead. It could be that his insulting, tone-deaf critiques of other writers' work finally caught up with him, or maybe it was his insistence on the artistic merits of Garth Brooks, or possibly it was his own inability to produce any music writing that made one smidgen of impact or sense at all (check out, if you've got some caffeine pills, his incoherent VOICE book report on the ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC). His laborious assessment in SPIN of a recent Bruce Springsteen reissue was so blindly literary that one could've come away thinking that this Springsteen guy just played music as an excuse to write cute little vignettes about about cars and chicks (which may be the case, but...). Maybe, as some say, Weisbard's heart is in the right place. But in 1999, that and a dollar won't get your ass on the F Train.

9. **Ethan Smith** (NEW YORK). From SASSY cabin boy to EW sniglet editor to NEW YORK pop music critic, this emaciated young lad has risen steadily to his current level of total incompetence. Issuing consistently jaw-dropping summations of music he's obviously never heard or felt or understood, Smith is probably what the Seinfeld-mourning consumers of this Hamptons leaflet deserve, but he should still be ashamed of himself. Much like Thomas Frank, Smith has the profitable ability to prattle on like a mid-40s patrician (therefore pleasing his mid-40s patrician editors), yet still front like he relates to the wounded, channel-surfing troubadours of his generation (Beck, Elliott Smith, other nerdy white people).

10. **Danyel Smith** (VIBE). Once a stridently poetic, yet level-headed critic of hip hop and r&b, the editor-of-chief of Big Willie Inc.'s periodical division has evolved into a remote, two-timing industry prick-puss. With the introduction of glossy hip-hop stepchild BLAZE, she's now free to pursue her dream of transforming VIBE into a touchy-feely, art-directed

celebration of faux-bourgeois splendor (free of rap-related grime). These days, if you read a cover feature by Smith, expect the following--powdery, boudoir boy-bonding, wine-sipping diva-lectical coos and whispers, lovingly extensive hairdo deconstructions, and absolutely, under no circumstances, any critical evaluation of THE MUSIC, or how its sound might inform the artist. And while she has faced inexcusable physical threats, Smith's implication that brutality against hip hop journalists is an African-American "family matter," and that the mainstream press is blowing it out of proportion, rings extremely hollow. It's a power thing, not a race thing, which is why SPIN's Craig Marks gets choked by Marilyn Manson's goons, and not ROLLING STONE's Joe Levy. More bothersome is the fact that Smith, like so many writers/editors, would rather get a hug and a pound from an artist than a nod from a fellow journalist. Therein lies the hugest chunk of the problem.

THE UNEARNED CHIP ON HIS/HER SHOULDER AWARD: BLAZE's **Jesse Washington**, who suddenly transformed into a self-righteous paragon of hip hop journalism after being threatened and beaten up by ghetto supastars Wyclef Jean and Deric "D-Dot" Angelettie (aka, The Madd Rapper). Sadly, Washington's overhyped, overbudgeted, and under-edited magazine would never have earned him similar props.

THE PREMATURE END-ZONE-DANCE AWARD: THE SOURCE's Editor-in-Chief, **Selwyn Seyfu Hinds**, who seems a tad too satisfied that his troops have, so far, avoided the working-over received by fellow hip hop scribes. Moral of the story: No matter how hard you push Ice Cube's weight, he ain't never gonna invite you over to split the dividends. Believe that. And if ever does, watch your back.

THE GET YOUR LIPS OFF THAT EXHAUST PIPE AWARD: XXL Executive Editor **Robert "Scoop" Jackson**, who, in a late '98 issue, wrote this for the "Respect Due" (sic)tion: "To Mack 10 and Ice Cube: Heard you all didn't 'like' the stories. Damn shame. Thought we was one-mind. Brotha just tried to look out, seriously. On that next level. Got too much love for both of you to misrepresent or sell you out. Read deeper. Just trying to show you niggas real love, because I got nothing but that for both of you. It hurts y'all don't feel it. My bad. I'm tired. I quit." MY BAD!!!!??? Hey Scoop, how about a little motherfucking respect for yourself and your readers, asshole! In case you've forgotten, that's who you're writing for, not some egomaniac studio gangsta who spends

hundreds of thousands of dollars on a bullshit video so he can "metaphorically" gun down playa haters, aka, music writers, aka YOU!

THE DING DONG THE WITCH IS DEAD AWARD: The NEW YORK POST's **Lisa Robinson**, the legendarily used-up floozy who could always be counted on to stroke the egos of rock music's biggest jerks, was finally put out to editorial pasture. Upon hearing the news, Robinson column faves Billy Corgan and Michael Stipe were spotted smacking themselves over their pampered bald heads with rolled-up copies of SPIN.

THE AVERAGE WHITE MAN AWARD: SPIN senior editor **CHARLES AARON**, for his heart-rending attempt to explain, in 56,000 words or less, why we should feel sorry for that misogynistic asshole in Limp Bizkit ("What the White Boy Means When He Says Yo," SPIN, Nov. '98). Sorry Charlie, but no amount of cultural studies blood-letting will ever change the fact that Mr. White Folks should GET OFF THE FRIGGIN' MIKE! It's the Eleventh Commandment, homeboy.

THE WHERE DID SHE GO AND HOW CAN WE KEEP HER THERE? AWARD: Evelyn "RENT Rules" McDonnell, rumored to be "working on a novel." OK, you can stop laughing now.

THE IT'S END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT AND I FEEL FINE AWARD: Sonic architecture enthusiast **James Hunter** and once-brilliant wit **Rob Sheffield**, whose cynical, fawning affirmations of pop/r&b fluff are B-plus term papers, at best. Imagine Rosie O'Donnell with a graduate degree in English. Then kill yourself.

THE MY-AREN'T-WE-SMART-BOYS-WITH-OUR-TOYS? AWARD: Of course, it's the British trainspotter's catechism **THE WIRE**, a monthly logjam of the most defensively arrogant, humorlessly dense, and gleefully school-marmish verbiage (David Toop excepted) you'll hopefully never encounter in any other music magazine. After institutionalizing the annoying Euro catchphrase "electronica," lapping up everything DJ Spooky ever mumbled, and trashing rock-damaged Americans for not inducting Lamonte Young into the Baseball Hall of Fame, they just keep on droning. Special shout-out to distressed beat-writers Peter Shapiro and Kodwo Eshun (who repeatedly express disgust over the lack of critical appreciation for music they adore): If your prose skills ever remotely

approached your passion for the sounds in question, then we could chat. Until then, take your banal hyperbole and sod off.

THE DANCING WITH MYSELF AWARD: Who else but **Kodwo Eshun**? Author of the "avant theory" spank book MORE BRILLIANT THAN THE SUN, and hyperactive talking head in the electronica training film "Modulations," Eshun combines the frantic, idealistic enthusiasm of a 16-year-old who just found out that the CIA does really bad things, with the hectoring snootiness of a crusty Ivy League prof. His haughtily silly tome (in which he somehow manages to dismiss the relevance of African-American history to African-American music) was taken dead-seriously by folks who own no John Cage records, did poorly on their verbal SATs, and were afraid to disagree with his vastly indecipherable vocab. It was ignored, according to Eshun, by heathens who still listen to guitars and watch TV (aka, Americans). Easy enough to avoid at a party, Eshun keeps popping up in print, even penning a boring review or two for hated SPIN (which he later attacked for its "grotesquely short-listened anti-electronic music policy"). At present, he's locked in a showdown with Simon Reynolds to see who can invent more pointless genre names and corny modifiers for supposedly high-minded electronic dance music that nobody seems to hear quite the way they do.

PEATH OUT....

JoJo Dancer, aka MC House Shooz
c/o The Rock Critical List
122 Front Street
Apartment Zero
Your Mother's House, USA

Available from:
SEE HEAR FANZINES, MAGAZINES & BOOKS
59 East 7th Street
New York NY 10003
e-mail: seehearfan@aol.com
http://www.zinemart.com