“Pop’s first literary attendant was journalism, which to this day remains its acolyte and accomplice,” writes Hanif Kureishi in the foreword to the Faber Book of Pop, a much better collection of writings on popular music than the volume under review. (The Faber Book trawls more widely across time and genres for its writing, including excerpts from books as well as papers and magazines.) Rock journalists fulfill an important cultural and commercial function—defining taste, writing cultural history, and assisting the music industry to shift units. Yet little has been written about such journalism, particularly its history; the exception is Pop Music and the Press (2002), edited by Steve Jones, plus a handful of articles by other writers. A browse through The Sound and the Fury shows what rich pickings rock journalism provides for historians, especially as mainstream journalism loosens its tie and begins to use pop as a reference point in all kinds of writing.

The Sound and the Fury is a sourcebook of a certain kind of rock journalism, not a history book. The collected interviews, reviews, and reportage add little to the substantial number of such anthologies apart from its fascinating quirk of introducing each piece with a brief retrospective comment by the various authors, in which they contextualize and reflect on their writing. The book is a sampler, in print, of a much wider selection available on the paid subscription website, Rock’s Backpages (www.rocksbackpages.com).

It works from an unspoken but narrow definition of what rock journalism is. The writings span only part of the potential period, from 1964 to 1997, seen as a golden age of the genre by Hoskyns, who laments in his foreword “how free rock writers once were to express themselves: how intense and committed, how irreverent and iconoclastic” (p. x). Maybe, but the reader would not pick that up from this anthology, most of it written in surprisingly straight journalese.

The strand of rock journalism collected here concentrates on the kind of music that Nik Cohn (one of the greatest pop writers, not represented here) hates: music that self-consciously considers itself an art form. It is difficult now to imagine a time, pre-Beatles and Dylan, when that was not true. This writing is predominantly white, male, under thirty, heterosexual, and American—and that includes the British examples, “jes’ itchin’ to adopt the phrasin’” and worldview of the U.S. writers who created the genre. Most of it was written for mainstream newspapers or the established music press, such as New Musical Express or Rolling Stone, despite the fact that the most daring examples of rock writing are usually found in fanzines and underground papers (before the writers moved on to the “big papers”).

To give the book its due, it includes most of the canon of rock journalism—Al Aronowitz, Miles, Charles Shaar Murray, Jon Savage, Greil Marcus, John Landau, Lenny Kaye, and Greg Shaw. But there are surprising omissions. On the British side alone, where are Paul Morley, Danny Baker, Geoff Barton, and Nick Kent? The anthology is also well structured, divided into sections on fame, in-depth interviews, trends, festivals, live reviews, and retrospectives.

It is fascinating to track changes in writing style, from Aronowitz’s straight news reporting of the Beatles arriving in the United States in 1964, with its adult tone of voice and detached stance, through the adoption of New
Journalism styles in the early 1970s (exemplified here by the British writers Miles and Charles Shaar Murray) and on to the knowing, authoritative registers of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Jon Savage on Nirvana, full of cultural references high and low, and indistinguishable from the style of the serious newspapers’ arts sections. Some of the bravest experimentation is missing, perhaps because it does not age well, such as the zeal of the cultural studies convert Ian Penman, who would bamboozle us ‘70s teenagers with words like “mores” and “reification” in the British music paper *Sounds*. Was it genuine sixth-form enthusiasm on his part, or just one of those newsroom competitions, to use the word of the week as many times as possible? Also absent is one of the greatest pieces of music journalism ever, by Mark P in his punk fanzine *Sniffing Glue*—“This is a chord” scrawled in marker pen next to a guitar tab diagram; “This is another,” again with diagram; “This is a third” and at the bottom of the page, underlined, “Now form a band.” Occasionally there are glimpses of similarly inspiring writing, the kind that creates the music in your head before you have bought the record, such as Greg Shaw’s description of the end of the Who song “My Generation”: “a minute or so of furious vandalism, with all instruments feeding back, amps and speakers blowing right and left, bringing up images of lightning bolts arcing across electrodes in some Frankenstein laboratory, and all the while this maniacal beat like eight baboons with heavy sticks in a tiny cubicle with walls of stretched drumskin, fighting for their lives to get out” (p. 339): This style of rock journalism was later lampooned as “cathedrals of sound” writing.

Beyond the vocabulary, phrasing, and voice, there are also varieties of article format and approach, including question-and-answer interviews; background investigations; traditional journalistic features; attempts to write first drafts of “rock history” by classifying, differentiating, and tracing roots; and distanced overviews which explain the rules. All are trying to overcome two problems central to rock journalism: how to be more than free advertising or consumer journalism, and how to cope with the fact that many people who make life-changing music are not very good at talking about it. A more recent problem, cleverly tackled by *Mojo* magazine, has been how to write for an ageing readership about music that hoped it would die before it got old.

The values of this kind of rock journalism are laid bare in the anthology. Of course, the historian’s hindsight should not be used to sneer, but it is fascinating to note that, in the notoriously misogynistic world of rock music, the only star to be challenged on this point is a black rapper—perhaps a white interviewer’s defense against that music’s uncomfortable focus on racism? The political naivete of the musicians is matched only by that of the interviewers, and many of the British examples betray a metropolitan condescension, such as Will Self’s view that Morrissey’s “miserabilism” was caused by the environment of the northern (and therefore grim) city of Manchester. As with literary journalism, there is the snobbery of a half-unwritten canon. David Toop is one of the rare writers represented here who transcended his time and culture, and fit rock into the bigger picture. But, as someone who grew up waiting for Thursdays when the music papers came out and who dabbled in this field myself (not very successfully), I wonder whether this worldview stunted me, morally and aesthetically.

*The Sound and the Fury* would work as a source book when teaching the history of music or arts journalism, but there are better selections around. The book kept shouting research questions at me, about antecedents of writing styles, their development and convergence, about the assimilation of subject matter and style from the underground press, about the origins of the “star interview” and the creation of the rock canon. Perhaps the genre’s adolescent personality has discouraged serious study, too self-conscious to be treated as innocent research material but too infantile to be taken at its own estimation. If nothing else, this book reveals how much work is still to be done on the history of popular music journalism.

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