

How to be a Rock Critic & Here's How A Megatonic Journey with Lester Bangs - Shakin' Street

-(Shakin' Street Gazette #15, 10/10/74)

Lately I've noticed a new wrinkle on the American landscape: It seems as if there's a whole generation of kids, each one younger than the last, all of whom live, breathe, and dream of but one desire: "I want to be a rock critic when I grow up!"

If that sounds condescending let it be known that I was once just like them; the only difference was that when I held such aspirations, the field was relatively uncluttered—it was practically nothing to barge right in and commence the slaughter—whereas now, of course, it's so glutted that the last thing anybody should ever consider doing is entering this racket. In the first place, it doesn't pay much and doesn't lead anywhere in particular, so no matter how successful you are at it, you'll eventually have to decide what you're going to do with your life anyway. In the second place, it's basically just a racket in the first place, and not a particularly glorious one at that.

It almost certainly won't get you laid. (Rock critics are beginning to get groupies of a sort now, but most of them are the younger, aspiring rock critics—like the kind on Shakin' Street—of one sex or another.) It won't make you rich: The highest-paying magazine in the rock press still only pays thirty bucks a review, and most of the other magazines fall way below that. So you'll never be able to make a living off of it. Nobody will come up to you in the street and say, "Hey, I recognize you! You're Jon Landau! Man, that last review was really far out!" A lot of people, in fact, will hate you and think you're a pompous asshole just for expressing your opinions, and tell you so to your face.

On the other side of the slug, though, are the benefits. Which are okay, if you don't get taken in by them. The first big one is that if you stay at this stuff long enough you'll start to get free records in the mail, and if you persevere even longer you may wind up on the promotional mailing lists of every company in the nation, which will not only save you a lot of money on pay day and ensure that you'll get to hear everything and anything you want, but help to pay the rent on occasion when you sell the albums spilling into your bathroom to local used records stores, at prices ranging from five cents to over a dollar apiece. Plus on Christmas you don't have to buy anybody any presents if you don't want to: Just give your mother the new Barbra Streisand album Columbia sent you because Barbra's trying to relate, your big sister one of the three copies of the new Carole King that you got in the mail, your little sister that Osmonds double live LP you never even opened because you're too hip... all down the line, leaving you with enough money saved to stay fucked-up on good whiskey over the holidays this year.

Another fringe benefit which will sooner or later accrue if you hew steadily on this jive-ass scrawl, is that you will be invited to press parties for the opening of new acts in town. It helps to live in places like L.A. and New York, because they have more of them there; I know some people, in fact, who have almost literally kept themselves from starving for months at a time by eating dinner at a different press party every night. (I

know other people who have made entire careers out of attending these things, but that's a different story.) The food's usually pretty good to magnificent, unless it's some blue-jeaned folkie and the company's trying to be with-it by serving organic slop unfit for the innards of a sow; even in such an extreme case as that, though, you can content yourself with sopping up the booze, which is plentiful and usually of high quality. So even if you live at home or haven't had any trouble lately keeping the wolf from the door, you can get drunk free a lot and that's always a pleasure, even if you do usually have to sit through some shit like John Prine or Osibisa just for a few glasses of gin. Sure you're prostituting yourself in a way, but so are they, and what are most modern business, social, or sexual relationships if not a process of symbiotic exploitation? It's the same tub of shit no matter where it perches, so you might as well kick back and enjoy yourself while you can.

The next big step up after press parties is that you'll start receiving invitations to concerts, events, and record company conventions in distant cities. Free vacations! The record companies will pay your plane fare, put you up in a swank hotel with room service (usually), and wine and dine you like mad for the duration of your stay, all just because they want you to write about some act they're trying to break. This is where things get a little cooler and less of a hustle, because once you've had enough stuff published that they're willing to drop a few hundred smackeros to get you to do a story on somebody in their stable, you can pretty much pick and choose who you want to write about. Well, not totally, but everybody finds their own level, and it finds them. Like if you're a red-hot flaming-eared heavy metal fanatic, they'll call you up one day and offer to fly you to Chicago or New York to see, oh, the Stooges, maybe. Or at least Jukin' Bone.

The final benefit (and for some people, the biggest) is that during most of these stages and at an increasingly casual level as time goes on, you'll get to hobnob with the Stars. Backstage at concerts, in the dressing room drinking their wine, rapping casually with the famous, the talented, the rich, and the beautiful. Most of 'em are just jerks like everybody else, and you probably won't really get to meet any real Biggies very often since the record companies don't need publicity on them so why should they inflict you on 'em, but you will become friends with a lot of Stars of the Future. Or at least also-rans.

Okay, so that's the rosy vista. I painted it for true, and if you want it, it's yours, becuz after almost five years in this racket I finally decided I'm gonna break down and tell the whole world how to break in. I could get a lotta dough for this if I wanted to—some of us have talked for years about starting a Famous Rock Critics' School—but fuck it, I'm too lazy to take the time to set up some shit like that, and besides it's about time everybody got wind of the True Fax of Rock 'n' Roll Criticism. Listen well, and decide for yourself whether you wanna bother with it.

The first thing to understand and bear in mind at all times is that the whole thing is just a big ruse from the word go, it don't mean shit except exploitatively and in the zealous terms of wanting to inflict your tastes on other people. Most people start writing record

reviews because they want other people to like the same kind of stuff they do, and there's nothing wrong with that, it's a very honest impulse. I used to be a Jehovah's Witness when I was a kid so I had it in my blood already, a head start. But don't worry. All you gotta do is just keep bashin' away, and sooner or later people will start saying things to you like, "How do you fit the Kinks into your overall aesthetic perspective?"

Well they won't really talk that jive-ass, but damn close if you travel in the right (or wrong, as the case may be) circles. Because that old saw is true: most rock critics are pompous assholes. Maybe most critics are pompous assholes, but rock critics are especially—because they're working in virgin territory, where there's absolutely no recognized, generally agreed on authority or standards. Nor should there be. Anything goes, so fake 'em out every chance you get. Rock 'n' roll's basically just a bunch of garbage in the first place, it's noise, it's here today and gone tomorrow, so the only thing that can possibly trip you up is if you begin to reflect that if the music's that trivial, can you imagine how trivial what you're doing is?

Which actually is a good attitude to operate from, because it helps keep the pomposity factor if check. Half the rock critics in the country, no, 90% of the rock critics in the world have some grand theory they're trying to lay on each other and everybody else, which they insist explains everything in musical history and ties up all the loose ends. Every last one of 'em has a different theory and every last one of the theories is total bullshit, but you might as well have one as part of your baggage if you're going to pass. Try this: ALL ROCK 'N' ROLL CULTURES PLAGIARIZE EACH OTHER. THAT IS INHERENT IN THEIR NATURE. SO MAYBE, SINCE WHAT ROCK 'N' ROLL'S ALL ABOUT IS PLAGIARISM ANYWAY, THE MOST OUT-AND-OUT PLAGIARISTS, THE IMITATORS OF THE PRIME MOVING GENIUSES, ARE GREATER AND MORE VALID THAN THOSE GENIUSES! JUST CHECK THIS OUT: THE ROLLING STONES ARE BETTER THAN CHUCK BERRY! THE SHADOWS OF KNIGHT WERE BETTER THAN THE YARDBIRDS! P.F. SLOAN'S FIRST ALBUM WAS A MASTERPIECE, WAY BETTER THAN BLONDE ON BLONDE (I know one prominent rock critic in Texas who actually believes this; he's a real reactionary, but so are most of 'em)!

Pretty pompous, huh? Well, that just happens to be one of my basic theories, although I don't really believe all the stuff I said in there (not that that makes a diddley damn bit of difference), and you can have it if you want it to bend or mutate as you please. Or come up with your own crock of shit; anyway, it's good to have one for those late-nite furious discussions leading absolutely nowhere. See, the whole thing's just a big waste of time, but the trappings can be fun and you always liked to whack off anyway. Like, look, you can impress people you wanna fuck by saying impressive things like, "John Stewart Mill couldn't write rock 'n' roll, but Dylan could have written 'An Essay On Human Understanding.' Only he would have called it 'Like a Rolling Stone!'" (Dave Marsh of Creem magazine actually said that to me, and everybody else who lived with us, and everybody he talked to on the phone for the next month, once.) Just imagine laying that on some fine little honey—she'd flip out! She'd think you were a genius! Either that or a pompous asshole. But in this business, like any other, you win some and you lose some. Persevere, kid.

Where were we? Ah yes, you should also know that most of your colleagues are some of the biggest neurotics in the country, so you might as well get used right now to the way they're gonna be writing you five- and ten-page single-spaced inflammatory letters reviling you for knocking some group that they have proved is the next Stones. It's all very incestuous, like this great big sickoid club full of people who were probably usually the funny looking kid in class, with the acne and the big horn-rims, all introverted, and just sat home every night through high school and played his records while the other kids yukked and balled it up. Tough luck, genius is pain. Or frustrated pop stars, all rock critics are frustrated pop stars and you should see 'em singing to themselves when nobody else is around. Boy, do they get corny! Melodramatic? Whooo!! Some of them actually go so far as to invest their entire life savings in trendy pop star wardrobes, and others are so monomaniacal as to go beyond that to the actual steps of forming a band of their own. And you can rest assured that all of them write songs, and have constant daytime and nightdaze fantasies of big contracts with ESP Disk at least.

Speaking of investing your life savings, another good way of letting on to everybody on the block that you're a rock critic is to go out and waste a lot of money buying old albums in bargain bins. They have these turd-dumps in most drug stores or supermarkets, full of last year's crap and older stuff at prices ranging from as low as a quarter all the way up to \$2.50 and more. If you patronize these scumholes regularly, you will soon begin to build a Definitive Rock 'n' Roll Albums Collection, which is of course a must for anybody who's into this way of life really seriously. The object is simple: you gotta have EVERYTHING, no matter how arcane or shitty it is, because it all fits into the grand bulwark of Rock. So just go out there and throw all your money away, it's a good investment. You'll be filling your room with mung, but so what: How many other people do you know who have the Battered Ornaments album? Right. They don't know what they're missing.

I know one rock critic who actually drew out his life's savings and drove from St. Louis, where he lived, to New York and back, by way of Chicago, Detroit and New Jersey, AND STOPPED AT EVERY BARGAIN BIN ALONG THE WAY. That was the entire purpose of the trip, to visit bargain bins. Now this guy is obviously a real doofus and totally out of his mind, but you can see where this business can lead you if you're lucky and apply yourself: down blind alleys.

Speaking of this same doofus reminds me of another riff that is essential to have if you're gonna be a hotshit rock critic. You gotta find some band somewhere that's maybe even got two or three albums out and might even be halfway good, but the important thing is the more arcane it is the better, it's gotta be something that absolutely nobody in the world but you and two other people (the group's manager and one member's mother) knows or cares about, and what you wanna do is TALK ABOUT THIS BUNCH OF OBSCURE NONENTITIES AND THEIR RECORD(S) LIKE THEY'RE THE HOTTEST THING IN THE HISTORY OF MUSIC! You gotta build 'em up real big, they're your babies, only you alone can perceive their true greatness, so you gotta go around telling everybody that they're better than the Rolling Stones, they beat the Beatles black

and blue, they murtelyze the Dead, they're the most significant and profound musical force in the world. And someday their true greatness will be recognized and you will be vindicated as a seer far ahead of your time.

Sometimes this scheme can really pay off, like if you happen to pick a Captain Beefheart or Velvet Underground way before they get widely known, although they're not really eligible because this group has gotta be so obscure that they can put out all kindsa albums and nobody pays any attention to 'em but you, they're just off moldering in a cutout rack somewhere if not for your devoted efforts.

Doofus (of the preceding paragraph) came up with a lulu in this department, couple of 'em in fact: All he ever talks about is Amon Dòòl II, Bang, and Budgie. Ever heard of any of 'em? That's what I thought. And you probably never will except if he's around to pester you about them. Amon Dòòl II are this psychedelic experimental avant-garde chance music free jazz electronic synthesizer space rock group from Germany. They got all kinds of albums out over there, there's even two groups with the same name, Amon Dòòl I and Amon Dòòl II, but they only got three albums out here and hardly anybody ever heard of 'em, although a whole shitload of people sure will if Doofus keeps up his one-man propaganda campaign on their behalf! They happen to be real good, but that's beside the point. And Bang and Budgie, his other two pet monomanias, are a couple of Black Sabbath imitations, one from Florida and one from England, one pretty good and one not so hot. So he and this other critic from Texas (also previously mentioned) send big long hate letters back and forth to each other telling each other what morons they are, because the Texan don't like Budgie or something like that. Get the idea?

Also I turned Doofus onto Can, another German psychedelic schnozz-ball that has lotsa 17-minute electro-raga jams, and he listens to one side of their album one time and sez to me: "Don't you think Can are better than the Stooges?" See what I mean? When all week he's been asking me things like, "Don't you think Amon Dòòl II are the greatest group in history?" and "Don't you think Dance of the Lemmings (one of their albums, featuring such standards as "Dehypnotized Toothpaste," "Landing in a Ditch," and "A Short Stop at the Transylvanian Brain Surgery") is the greatest album of all time?" and I keep saying no, but he won't take no for an answer, he's a man with a Plan! A crusader on behalf of Neglected Genius. So you see the key: persistence. Make a total nuisance of yourself, and people will begin to take you seriously. Or at least stop regarding you as not there. And if he wants to continue on this obscuro roller-coaster ride, there are zillions of German bands: Take Guru Guru or Floh de Cologne, for example—these qualify as two of the finest choices in the Arcane Masterpiece department in history, indeed they do, because both are imports and you can't even find a single Floh de Cologne or Guru Guru album anywhere in the United States except by ordering it special from Germany! So nobody knows what it sounds like so they gotta listen to Doofus. So as you can see Doofus copped himself a real hot item, but chances like that come only once in a lifetime.

That pretty much takes care of the qualifications. Like what you see? Wanna give it a

try? Well, get ready, because the big time is just around the corner. The only thing left to mention before you embark on your career as a rock critic is that talent has absolutely nothing to do with it, so don't worry if you don't know how to write. Don't even worry if you can't put a simple declarative sentence together. Don't worry if you can sign your name with an X. Anybody can do this shit, all it takes is a high level of unconsciousness (and you just got done reading an unconsciousness expanding session) and some ability to sling bullshit around. Also the bullshit is ready-made, you don't even have to think it up, all you gotta do is invest in a slingshot. All the word-type stuff you need has already been written anyway, it's in old yellow issues of Shakin' Street, Rolling Stone, Creem, and all the rest; just sit around reading and re-reading the damn things all day and pretty soon you'll have whole paragraphs of old record reviews memorized, which is not only a good way to impress people at parties and girls you're trying to pick up with your erudition, but allows you to plagiarize at will. And don't worry about getting caught, because nobody in this business has any memory and besides they're all plagiarists too and besides that all record reviews read the same. I learned to write 'em outta Down Beat, and it's the same shit in Rolling Stone; it's the same shit all over. Just stir and rearrange it every once in awhile. Take one riff and staple it to another; and if you get tired of thinking about how you're a rock critic, remember William Burroughs and the cut-up methods and think about being avant-garde. I do it all the time.

Okay, now it's time for you to write YOUR VERY FIRST ORIGINAL RECORD REVIEW. It's easy, all you gotta do is point. First, pick a title for the album:

- A.) Oranges in Exile
- B.) Outer City Blues & Heavy Dues
- C.) Cajun Sitar Dance Party
- D.) Hungry Children of Babylon
- E.) Eat Your Coldcream

Got it? Okay, the next part's just as easy. Just fill in the blanks:

This latest offering from _____

- A.) Harmonica Dan and His Red Light District
- B.) The Armored Highchair
- C.) Ducks in Winter
- D.) The Four Fat Guys
- E.) Arturo de Cordova

is _____

- A.) a clear consolidation of the artistic moves first tentatively ventured in his/her/their/its last album.
- B.) a real letdown after the masterpiece album and single that carried us all the way through the summer and warmed us over in the fall.
- C.) important only insofar as it will delineate the contours of the current malaise for

future rock historians, if there are any with all the pollution around now.
D.) definitely the album of the year.
E.) a heap of pig shit.

(How you doin' so far? See how easy it is!) Onward! Choose one of the following for the next sentence:

A.) In dealing with such a record, the time has come at last to talk about the responsibilities, if any, which any artist making rock 'n' roll bears to his audience, and specifically how those responsibilities relate to the political situation which we, all of us, and perforce rock 'n' roll, are compelled to come to terms with by dint of living in the United States of America today.

B.) I don't really think these guys / this dude / the chick in question / a singing dog can defend musical output which has proven increasingly shoddy by referring to such old handles as "personal expression," "experimentalism," "a new kind of artistic freedom," or any other such lame cop-out.

C.) It's such a thrill that this album finally came, that I am finally actually holding it in my hands, looking at the fantastically beautiful M.C. Escher drawing on the cover whilst trembling all over to the incredible strains of the music on the record from inside it which even now are wafting from the old Victrola, that I really don't know if I am going to come or cry.

D.) It's so goddam fucking boring to have to open all these pieces of shit every day, you waste your time, you break your fingernails, half the time it's just a repeat of an album that came yesterday, that I can hardly bring myself to slit open the shrink wrap once I get 'em outta the cardboard (which piles up in a big mess all over the house after it gets dragged outta the corner by all my asshole friends!), and I really can just barely stand to put the goddam things on the turntable after that. I wish it would break anyway so I wouldn't have to listen to 'em anymore. (Good one, huh, more than one sentence in this one!) But anyway, I put this piece of shit on just like all the others except the ones I never get around to, and right now I'm listening to it and you know what? I was right. It is a piece of shit!

E.) I don't remember how I got here, whose house this is, or where this typewriter came from, but anyway this new album is by the greatest fucking rock 'n' roll band in the whole wide world / most talented, sensitive balladeer of his generation whom many of us are already calling the New Dylan / sweetest songbird this side of the Thames has saved my life again just like all the others did, so I don't even care where I am, I don't care if I got rolled last night, I don't care if this place gets busted right now, I don't care if the world comes to an end because the cosmic message of truth and unity which this music is bringing to me has made me feel complete for the first time since 1968.

(Well, that wasn't hard at all, was it? A whole paragraph written already! But this is no place to stop: the most fun's yet to come. Tally ho!)

The first song on side one _____

- A.) "Catalina Sky"
- B.) "Death Rays in Your Eyes"
- C.) "I Wish I Was a Rusty Nail"
- D.) "Lady of Whitewater"
- E.) "Nixon Eats"

(choose again) _____

- A.) is a rousingly high spirited opener in march tempo.
- B.) starts things off at an extremely high energy level.
- C.) sets the pace and mood of the album most atmospherically.
- D.) won't win any Grammys this year.
- E.) reminds me of my Grandmother puking up her sherry into the bathtub the night we had fish that had gone bad for dinner when I was three years old.

The first thing you notice is _____

- A.) the vicious, slashing guitar solo.
- B.) the deep, throbbing bass lines.
- C.) how mellowly the sensitive, almost painfully fragile vocal is integrated with the mesmerizing Spanish chords from those four fine hollow-body Gibson guitars.
- D.) the cymbals aren't miked right.
- E.) that the entire mix is a washout and this album has what is probably the worst production of the year.

The full impact of what's going on in this cut may not reach you the first time, but if you keep listening a couple of times a day for a week or two, especially through headphones, it will come to you in a final flash of revelation that _____

- A.) you were wasting your time.
- B.) you are listening to a masterpiece of rock which so far transcends "rock" as we have known it that most people probably won't recognize its true worth for at least ten years.
- C.) the instruments are out of tune.
- D.) you should have bought the Band instead.
- E.) you're deaf in one ear.

Cut two is _____

- A.) a nice change of pace
- B.) more of the same phlegm
- C.) a definite picker-upper
- D.) interesting, at least

E.) insulting to the human ear (my dog didn't like it either)

by virtue of the fact that _____

- A.) it was produced by Phil Spector's cousin from Jersey.
- B.) it's only two seconds long.
- C.) the lyrics say more, and more concisely, about what we have done to our natural environment than anything else written in the past decade.
- D.) Bobby Keyes, Jim Price and Boots Randolph sit in for a real old time "blowing session."
- E.) I spilled Gallo Port in the grooves and it made it sound better.

In spite of that, I feel that the true significance of its rather dense and muted lyrics can only be apprehended by _____

- A.) the purchase of a hearing aid.
- B.) reading the sheet enclosed with the record.
- C.) going back and listening to "Memphis Blues Again," then come back to this and see if it doesn't blow you out the door!
- D.) taking a course in German.
- E.) throwing the incoherent piece of pig shit in the trash and going out for a beer, where something good is probably on the jukebox.

(Time for paragraph three already! Smooth sailing, bunky! You're almost there:)

This record has inspired such _____

- A.) ambivalent feelings
- B.) helpless adoration
- C.) bile and venom
- D.) total indifference
- E.) a powerful thirst

in me that I can't bring myself to describe the rest of the cuts. Track by track reviews are a bore anyway, and the album only costs \$4.97 at the right stores, so go down and get it and find out for yourself whether you'll like it or not. Who am I, who is any critic or any other sentient being on the face of the earth, to tell you what a piece of music sounds like? Only your ears can hear it as only your ears can hear it. Am I right or am I wrong? Of course I am. I do know that I will _____

- A.) go on listening to this album till I drop dead of cancer.
- B.) walk out into the backyard and toss this offense unto mine eyes into the incinerator soon as I finish typing this spew.
- C.) never forget the wonderful chance I've had here in the pages of Fusion to share this very special record, and my own deepest dredged sentiments about it, with you, who whether you know it or not are a very special person whom I love without qualification

even if we've never seen each other, I don't even know your name, and am so righteous that I don't even care if you look like a sow.

D.) break this elpee over the head of the very next Jesus Freak or Hare Krishna creep I see in the street, just for thrills!

E.) go to sleep now and awaken upon a new morning in which I may be able to appreciate this unabridged poetic outpouring with fresh ears.

So before I sign my name at the bottom of this page and pick up the check from the cheap kikes that run this rag that will never pay me anyway, I would like to leave you with one thought: _____

A.) Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

B.) There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke.

C.) The red man lost this land to you and me.

D.) Rock 'n' roll is dead. Long live rock 'n' roll.

E.) Since these assholes that're stupid enough to print this stuff don't pay me anything, why don't you? I've probably turned you on to a lot of good records over the years, and what do I get out of it? Nothing but a lot of grief! A lot of abuse from cretins who can't understand that rock 'n' roll IS the Revolution! A lot of cheap bloodsuckers like hell hounds on my trail! I got "Yer Blues"! I've paid my body and soul! So send me some \$\$ \$, goddammit, or I'll never write a word again as long as I live!

Your faithful correspondent, _____

You did it! You really did it! There, you see, that wasn't so hard, was it? Now YOU TOO are an officially ordained and fully qualified rock critic, with publication under your belt and everything. Just cut out the review, if you're finished filling in all the blanks, and send it to the rock magazine of your choice with a stamped, self-addressed envelope! If they send it back, send it to another one! Be persistent! Be a "go-getter"! Do you think Jon Landau ever let rejection slips get him down? No! And if you send it to all the rock mags in America, one of them is bound to print it sooner or later because most of them will print the worst off the wall shit in the world if they think it'll make 'em avant-garde! You could send 'em the instruction booklet on how to repair your lawn mower, just write the name of a current popular album by a famous artist at the top of the cover, sign your name at the bottom of the last page, and they'll print it! They'll think you're a genius!

And you are! And when all the money you asked for in this review starts pouring in from your fans, you'll be rich! David Geffen will invite you out to his house in the Catskills for the weekend! Miles Davis will step aside when you walk down the street! Seals of Seals & Crofts will tip his hat to you and sing "Bah'ah!" as you walk down the street! David Peel will write songs about you! So will John Lennon! So will everybody! Andy Warhol will put you in his movies! You'll tour with David Bowie, Leon Russell, and Atomic Rooster, reading your most famous reviews to vast arenas full of rabid fans! You'll be an international celebrity and die at 33! You made the grade! You are now a rock critic, and by tomorrow you will be one of the most important critics in America! You'll make Esquire's Heavy Hundred in 1974! Congratulations, and welcome to the club!

Your pal, R. J. Gleason Copyright © Lester Bangs 1974