

Debates of Artistic Value in Rock Music:
A Case Study of the Band Weezer, 1994-2001

An Essay Presented

by

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to

The Committee on Degrees in Social Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for a degree with honors

of Bachelor of Arts

Harvard College

March 2003

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the closing days of the summer of 1994, the band Weezer emerged onto the alternative music scene with their radio hit “Undone (The Sweater Song).” A quirky song comparing failing romance to an unraveling sweater, “Undone” launched the band to national prominence and proved the first of three successful singles off of their self-titled first album. Over the next year and a half, the band developed a strong popular following, particularly among young people, and sold over a million copies of their debut record. However, along with this popular success, the band attained a near-pariah status among the music press; framed by detractors as a packaged-and-sold novelty act, Weezer earned a reputation as a “flavor of the month” destined to be forgotten as a meaningless commercial act. The public’s reception of their 1996 sophomore effort *Pinkerton* seemingly confirmed this account of the band. Named the second worst record of the year by a *Rolling Stone* critics’ poll, *Pinkerton* proved a commercial disappointment, falling off the music sales charts in a matter of weeks. Following a series of tours that failed to revive the band’s popular appeal, Weezer, seemingly finished, went on hiatus in fall 1997.

Then, however, something peculiar occurred. After lying idle for nearly three years, Weezer reemerged in the summer of 2000 as a wildly popular and highly respected band. Weezer concerts sold out within minutes, a series of articles portrayed *Pinkerton* as a lost classic, and Weezer, at one point considered a throwaway act, suddenly garnered respect from the very same music press that

had once reviled it. With the release of the band's second eponymous CD in 2001, Weezer once again achieved chart success and critical, selling over a million copies of its new album and finding the record placed on a significant number of critics' "best of 2001" lists. This remarkable turnaround is puzzling. How does an album named the second worst release of the year get transformed into a "classic" over a three year time span? Moreover, what does it mean for a record to be labeled a "failure" or a "classic"?

In the pages that follow, I investigate these questions by establishing a model of how the artistic merits of rock music are appraised. Utilizing the institutional framework and terminology Pierre Bourdieu establishes in his "Market of Symbolic Goods," I frame rock music as a middlebrow art that regards itself as possessing certain elements of highbrow "legitimate" art – namely "symbolic value" beyond a work's value as a market commodity. I then use this institutional framework and aesthetic ideology to investigate the process by which Weezer's reputation changed dramatically over time. Examining data from several sources: an original survey of 150 music writers, an original survey of 20,000 Weezer fans, original interviews with music writers and editors, and an analysis of a sample of 2000 articles and reviews mentioning Weezer, I argue that a strong fan following led to a reconsideration of Weezer's artistic merits by the music press and altered the vocabulary used to discuss the band. I ultimately conclude that a number of parties play a role in deliberating claims of artistic value in rock music: music writers, artists, fans, and the commercial interests that employ writers and artists.

In chapter two, I outline Bourdieu's institutional framework and then investigate the various institutions within the rock community, evaluating the role each plays in the consecration of work as having this surplus symbolic value and outline the aesthetic criteria this matrix of agents advance. I briefly discuss the history of claims of rock as art and examine how the ideals of the rock community stem from these historical contingencies. I then discuss how such ideals structure the various institutions which make claims as to the artistic merits of rock music.

In the third chapter, I elaborate upon the culture of music criticism examining some of the norms of modern music criticism, ideological fractures within the discipline and occupational differences within the larger category of music writing. This discussion is built upon a national survey of music critics and interviews with several of the critics. I specifically explore the importance of historical context, genre histories, and authenticity, and explain how these concepts affect interpretation of alternative rock music from 1994 to 2001.

In chapter four, I provide a broad outline of Weezer's career followed by an examination of Weezer's reputation from 1994 to 1996. Utilizing a sample of pieces written on Weezer during this time and interviews with critics, I discuss the various images of Weezer presented in the press and held by various music writers. In particular, I examine Weezer's placement in the traditions of "geek-rock," "ironic" alternative rock, corporate rock and pop-rock, and discuss how those particular placements affected judgments of Weezer's authenticity, originality and broader merit.

In chapter five, I outline the development of the Weezer fan base during the period 1994 to 2001. Using a survey of 20,000 Weezer fans, I outline the demographic changes the Weezer fan base has undergone and how those changes are reflected in taste patterns of the fans. I then show the importance of social networks in developing and growing the Weezer fan base, and how these fan networks have resulted in a particularly mobilized fan base. I explore the ways that this mobilization is evidenced in the development of an online community which developed in the closing years of the 1990's and the means by which fans advanced an image of Weezer different from the those that had predominated in the music press between 1994 and 1997.

Finally, in chapter six, I examine how the music press has portrayed Weezer since the band returned from hiatus in 2000. I scrutinize images of Weezer as a cult favorite and the band's sophomore effort *Pinkerton* as a classic album and argue that popular notions of Weezer advanced by its fans, the changing norms of the "modern rock" scene (the successor of alternative rock), fans' importance as consumers, and the development of the "emo" music scene each played a significant role in the revision of Weezer's image and history.

CHAPTER 2: ROCK AS ART – AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

Ask most any music critic and he'll tell you that The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* was an "important" record, a great artistic achievement. Ask a rock aficionado about the Velvet Underground, and she'll explain how the band laid the foundation for the gritty aesthetic of punk music and modern day "garage rock." Rock music today has developed its own aesthetic ideology, its own history, its own standards of greatness that can be cited by its fans, artists and critics. Where do these aesthetic notions come from, who constructed this history, and how have the "great records" been anointed as great records?

Such questions ultimately lie at the heart of a sociological study of art, an examination of the standards governing the activity and an inquiry into the institutions and norms that structure the discipline. The approach taken here is based on the model outlined by C.J. Rees in his piece "Advances in the Empirical Sociology of Literature and the Arts: The Institutional Approach."¹ Rees argues that an "institutional analysis makes it plain that the activities of all literary institutions jointly contribute – albeit in varying degree and in very different ways – to the kind of (surplus) value an artwork is thought to possess."² This research program entails, first, identifying the various institutions and agents at work to instigate this belief in the value of art as *art* and, second, examining the "kind[s] of statement . . . accepted as the model of 'legitimate' aesthetic judgment" and the

¹ C.J Van Rees, "Advances in the Empirical Sociology of Literature and the Arts: The Institutional Approach," *Poetics* 12 (1983), 285-310.

“groups for which such statements acquire the status of (‘legitimate’) aesthetic judgments.”³

While much has been written about various elements of the rock community – particularly the influence and character of the music press, the nature of fandom, and the sociology of the production of music – little empirical work has been done on the ways in which rock as an activity mediates disputes about the aesthetic value of its works. This project, then, seeks to provide a fuller institutional account of the assignment of symbolic value within the world of rock. It uses a specific case study to examine the micro-processes underpinning the institutions and agents that constitute this area of cultural production.

This chapter aims to examine claims of surplus symbolic value in rock music by identifying the agents and institutions that have yielded the aesthetic standards by which rock is assessed. Symbolic value, here, is used as a measure of a work’s artistic merit – some appreciation of a good beyond the item’s value as a commodity. Of course, this term begs the question of what artistic merit is and how one separates an item’s value as a commodity from its value as art. These however are precisely the issues this paper aims to address. In order to explicate these concepts, I examine how Pierre Bourdieu’s institutional description of a “highbrow/legitimate” art world and a middlebrow art world maps onto the world of rock music. I contend that rock music represents an “intermediate” activity – one that reflects elements of both highbrow and middlebrow art. I describe rock music as an activity that, like a highbrow art,

² Ibid., 296.

³ Ibid., 296.

claims its goods hold a surplus symbolic value but, like middlebrow art, lacks institutional authority and “autonormativity,” the ability for institutions to independently define aesthetic standards without input from the masses. I then embellish upon Bourdieu’s barebones treatment of intermediate activities by outlining the history of claims of rock-as-art, the ideology underpinning this conception of rock, and the composition and function of the agents and institutions mediating debates about the symbolic value of rock music.

Bourdieu’s Sociology of Art

Bourdieu establishes an institutional framework to investigate art from a sociological perspective. A proper sociology of art, Bourdieu contends, requires an investigation of the relations between a piece of art, its producer, and the various institutions in the “fields of production” in which cultural goods are created.⁴ Attempting to account for the “system of relations of production and circulation of symbolic goods,” Bourdieu sets out to explain how modern fields of cultural production function: the factors influencing the production of “symbolic goods,” the differentiated ways in which they are instilled with value, and the institutions which mediate such processes.⁵

Accordingly, Bourdieu’s model regards the meaning and symbolic value of a cultural good as a consequence of the position of the piece’s producer “within the system of social relations and production and circulation.”⁶ Rather than arguing that an object’s meaning completely resides in the artist’s intentions,

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” trans. Rupert Swyer, *Poetics* 14 (1985), 17

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16

Bourdieu frames the artist as a single node in a web of institutions, including legitimating authorities and the market.⁷ This model of the art world, then, portrays aesthetic decisions as acutely social. Bourdieu argues that even “the most personal judgments” one may make about a work are the product of a series of social phenomena: how the artist framed her concept to the publisher, how the publisher presented the cultural object to its particular public, and the previous relations between the artist and the critic.⁸

Bourdieu argues for the existence of two distinct fields of production: “the field of restricted production (FRP),” wherein “economic profit is secondary to enhancement of the product’s symbolic value,” and “the field of large-scale production (FLP),” wherein economic value is the primary concern and wherein products are “hardly rated at all on the scale of symbolic values.”⁹ For Bourdieu, each of these fields has its own institutions, its own means of legitimizing cultural products, its own means of defining itself in relation to other fields, its own economics, and its own ideology.

Bourdieu traces the development of the fields of restricted and large-scale production to the growing independence of artists from the “aristocratic and ecclesiastical tutelage” that marked the art world throughout the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and the beginning of the classical age.¹⁰ The economic and social developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries stimulated a growing “public of potential consumers” and an “increasing social diversity,”

⁶ Ibid., 21

⁷ Ibid., 21

⁸ Ibid., 38

⁹ C.J. Van Rees, “Editor’s Preface to ‘The Market of Symbolic Goods’” *Poetics* 14 (1985), 13.

factors which helped facilitate a modicum of economic independence for the artist and “competing principle[s] of legitimacy.”¹¹ Against this economic backdrop, a “socially distinguishable category of professional artists and intellectuals” began to emerge and establish its own normative standards relatively independent from the demands of the mass market.¹² Concurrently, a number of “competing” institutions “having the power to consecrate” works with cultural legitimacy began to emerge: academies, salons, publishers, “theatrical impresarios,” etc.¹³ With the spreading industrial revolution, the market for art exploded: literature became cheaper to print and widely available and the increasingly educated public formed a growing consumer base for the artists’ work.¹⁴

However, this growth in the commerce of art revealed a fundamental tension within the art world. “Symbolic goods,” Bourdieu asserts, “are a two faced reality”; one the one hand, the art is culturally “consecrated” for its symbolic value, but on the other hand, art, as an item sold through a market for a price, is reduced “to the status of a simple article of merchandise.”¹⁵ Among artists, then, this commercialism fueled a backlash against “art-as-commodity” and an “affirm[ation] of the irreducibility of the work of art.”¹⁶ This “Romanticist reaction,” as Bourdieu tags it, ultimately aimed to redefine the “representation of culture as a kind of superior reality, irreducible to the vulgar demands of economics” as well as to “distinguish the artist and intellectual from other

¹⁰ Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14

¹² *Ibid.*, 15

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16

commoners by posing the unique products of ‘creative genius’ against interchangeable products” whose value was derived from their market value.¹⁷

These tensions within the art world, then, ultimately created of a rift between the “field of restricted production (FRP)” – art-as-pure-symbolism created for and judged by other artists – and the “field of large-scale cultural production (FLP),” which aimed to achieve “the largest possible market” for its cultural goods.¹⁸

The FRP has maintained the autonomy sought by the artists aiming to secure the purely symbolic value of art. Bourdieu argues that the FRP has developed its own private norms by which to evaluate and consecrate great works, thereby distancing this art world from the aesthetic whims of the public.¹⁹ The interpretation of artwork of the FRP – the evaluation of its meaning and symbolic worth – rests solely in the hands of those educated in the norms of the community; consequently, the “intelligibility of works” stems from the “inspired readings” of initiated critics, rather the judgments of the “public of non-producers.”²⁰ Establishing a “public at once of critics and accomplices,” the FRP tends to “obey its own logic,” an internally validating practice wherein the field’s members retain the power to “define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products.”²¹

Enabling the autonomy of the FRP are a number of institutions and agents that society views as legitimate authorities to evaluate highbrow art. Bourdieu argues that this constellation of institutions not only articulates and debates the

¹⁷ Ibid., 17

¹⁸ Ibid., 17

¹⁹ Ibid., 17

²⁰ Ibid., 18

meaning of works but also legitimates the autonomous art world and trains new generations of producers and informed critics in the criteria that have been developed and the histories written about the discipline.²² For Bourdieu, academies, museums, “learned societies,” and the education system form the core institutions within the field; “academies and the corps of museum curators . . . claim a monopoly over the consecration of contemporary producers,” while “the educational system claims a monopoly over the consecration of the past and over the production of consecration of cultural consumers.”²³

In addition to these “fully institutionalized” bodies, other agents play important roles in the consecration and interpretation of artwork: “literacy cenacles, critical circles, salons, and small groups surrounding a famous author or associating with a publisher, a review or a literary or artistic magazine.”²⁴ The relations within the field ultimately define the role of any particular agent, and as such, the function of these partially-institutionalized bodies varies. The FRP’s network of agents and institutions “fulfills a function homologous to that of the church:” “defending the sphere of legitimate culture against competing, schismatic or heretical messages, which may provoke radical demands and heterodox practices among various publics, the system of conservation and cultural consecration.”²⁵ Thus this matrix maintains the field’s independence from larger society, at once preserving the field’s ideology and legitimacy and

²¹ Ibid., 17

²² Ibid., 23

²³ Ibid., 26

²⁴ Ibid., 24

²⁵ Ibid., 25

acting as a locus for debate about how to incorporate new work into the field's canon.

Having established this overview of the FRP, Bourdieu explains specifically how the “public meaning” of a work is mediated within the field by examining the work's “circulation and consumption” throughout the “agents and institutions” of the FRP.²⁶ Submitting his or her work to this network of consecrating agents and institutions, the artist initiates the arbitration of the work's meaning, implicitly making a claim about the work's place in the orthodoxy and its “cultural legitimacy.”²⁷ In order to guide the interpretation of his or her work, the artist must place the work within “the historically available cultural taxonomies,” while articulating the distinct qualities – “a specialty, a manner, a style” – that the work offers.²⁸ Various agents within the FRP – museum curators, art/literary societies, academies, other artists – then make particular claims about the meaning and value of the work.²⁹

Bourdieu contends that the circulation of a cultural good is a twofold process, at once generating a public meaning for the work and refining collective notions of cultural legitimacy. Within the field's network of agents and institutions, a continual battle takes place between various claims to orthodoxy: “The FRP can never be dominated by one orthodoxy without continuously being dominated by the . . . question of criteria defining the legitimate exertion of a

²⁶ Ibid., 21

²⁷ Ibid., 21

²⁸ Ibid., 19

²⁹ Ibid., 19

certain type of cultural practice.”³⁰ Thus, in their judgments about the place of a cultural good in the canon, the consecrating agents reshape the boundaries of the canon, refining the aesthetic principles governing that activity.

In contrast to this autonomous, institutionally legitimized system, the FLP is marked by a dependence on the population writ-large, both as a source of economic support and as the determiner of the content of the work. Bourdieu contends that art produced within the FLP, or “middlebrow art,” is aimed at the “‘average’ public” with the goal being to garner the largest portion of the market possible.³¹ Whereas the value of high-brow art is mediated by the FRP’s institutions, the value of a piece of middle-brow art depends on its marketability, and as such, work within the FLP is driven by “the quest for investment profitability.”³² Thus, while art produced within both the FRP and the FLP may be assessed an economic value, the value of a cultural good produced within FLP is dependent on the number of individuals who are willing to pay, say, twenty-five dollars for a Danielle Steele novel, and the economic value of an object in the FRP is a consequence of the symbolic value the item has been accorded by legitimate authorities and institutions.

To flesh out his conception of the FLP, Bourdieu cites an interview with a writer who aims to write a book “to be easily read by the widest possible public.”³³ Rather than aiming to satisfy the particular, possibly esoteric, aesthetic of the community of legitimized writers, the author wishes to resonate with the

³⁰ Ibid., 19

³¹ Ibid., 28

³² Ibid., 28

³³ Ibid., 28

average reader who may not be particularly culturally literate. Bourdieu argues that a consequence of the economic focus of the FLP is that symbolic goods in this domain tend to be “socially neutralized” – products are made to be purposefully unchallenging in an attempt to maximize accessibility.³⁴ Writing is seen as a technical craft for the producer within the FLP; the artist is challenged to refine his tools such that he can create a work that appeals to hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people.³⁵ The book, here, is declared a successfully written piece if it succeeds in reaching and affecting a significant portion of the market. One might contrast the task of this writer to that of an abstract painter whose works are imbued with meaning by legitimate cultural institutions. While in the former case, the voices of the populace are the measuring stick by which the work is judged, in the latter case, the opinions of the populace are subordinated to the judgments of legitimate cultural authorities: members of academies, museums, and high-brow art journals.

While “The Market of Symbolic Goods” provides a useful framework for evaluating two institutional networks that bestow symbolic goods with value –the market/population-at-large and a separate autonomous world of “legitimate” critics – most artwork seems to fall somewhere in between the two caricatured models Bourdieu constructs. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find an artist within the FLP who regards her work as a mere commodity without artistic value. While Bourdieu does seem to leave room for a “range of intermediaries,” including art “on the road to consecration” and art which imitates highbrow

³⁴ Ibid., 28

³⁵ Ibid., 30

works, his account fails to articulate precisely how and by whom these intermediaries are assigned “symbolic value.”³⁶

According to Bourdieu, these intermediate symbolic goods, with aspirations of a symbolic value beyond their material worth, ultimately fall within the FLP and as such are “condemned to define [themselves] in relation to legitimate culture”: borrowing legitimate aesthetic codes from the FRP, “aping” the tone and character of highbrow criticism, and displaying “ambivalent aggression” to the legitimating institutions that consecrate highbrow art.³⁷

Bourdieu argues that an “activity on the way to legitimization” ultimately faces a dilemma about how to regard its own legitimacy, given its veering away from widespread public acceptance and the resistance from “priests of legitimate arts,” whose ultimate aim is to protect the autonomy of the FRP and shield it from attempts by outsiders to alter the existing orthodoxies.³⁸ Thus, Bourdieu’s model, arguing that intermediate goods lack the same recognized institutions as highbrow art to authorize a legitimate “inspired reading,” begs the question of how the assignment of symbolic value to these intermediate goods occurs.

Rock: An Aspiring-Highbrow Activity

Rock music ultimately takes on many of the attributes Bourdieu ascribes to an intermediate activity, emulating key aspects of the legitimate art world while waging an internal struggle against the art-as-commodity within its ranks. In his piece “Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,” Motti Regev outlines

³⁶ Ibid., 29

³⁷ Ibid., 31-34

efforts by critics and “interpreters of music” to reshape rock music as a legitimate art.”³⁹ Regev traces claims of rock-as-art to the late 1960’s, when rock began to be seen as particularly “subversive” to “dominant culture” in a way that represented a significant social division.⁴⁰ Mary Harron, in her history of rock-as-commodity, locates this change in 1967 – the year “mods turned into hippies and pop into rock.”⁴¹ Harron argues that by this time the “pop audience” had begun to view rock music as outside the boundaries of their parent’s cultural world, and consequently started “to take itself and its idols seriously” as voices of an alternative cultural vision. Deena Weinstein concurs that this “counterculture, [as] the last major romantic movement,” proclaimed an “art-commerce binary” – one that “pitted the romantic artist” against the white-bread commercial culture of their parents.⁴²

Several institutions emerged to codify these popular notions: namely FM radio and the “serious” rock press.⁴³ Regev argues that in the late 1960’s, album-centered FM radio emerged as an alternative to AM radio stations whose playlists were determined by top-forty singles. These FM stations played a mix of “less commercially successful songs” culled from entire long-play records, in contrast to early pop’s emphasis on the “single” which had become a hallmark of the rock

³⁸ Ibid., 30

³⁹ Motti Regev, quoting Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, “Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,” *The Sociological Quarterly*, Volume 35 (1994): 86.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁴¹ Mary Harron, “McRock: Pop as a Commodity,” In *Facing the Music.*, ed. Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 179.

⁴² Deena Weinstein, “Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (Useful) Romantic Illusion,” in *Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky*. Ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 57.

⁴³ Regev. 90.

genre in the 1950s.⁴⁴ Regev argues that in Britain, radio stations increasingly added “special programs” featuring “‘alternative’ and ‘art’ rock” to their schedules.⁴⁵ These programming choices corroborated the claims of those rock fans asserting a distinction between “artistic” and “commercial” popular music.

At this same time a series of periodicals emerged “devoted to ‘serious’ treatment of rock, as opposed to the ‘entertainment’ oriented press.”⁴⁶ It is from within these pages that the history and ideology of rock music as an art emerged. Among the publications that emerged during this time were, in the United States, *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, and *Crawdaddy* and, in Britain, *Melody Maker* and *New Music Express*.⁴⁷ Writers for these publications picked up on the popular conception of rock-as-counterculture and wrote a series of narratives incorporating these ideals. Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan argue, that during this era writers such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus “mixed leftist sociology and what they could salvage from hostile critical theory with techniques previously associated with jazz criticism and even literary criticism,” bolstering the status of “rock ‘n’ roll star” to “artist.”⁴⁸

Regev notes that over the next decade, these “serious” writers “began to recapitulate, summarize and conclude their interpretations of the aesthetics, value and social meanings of the music in book form” as “biographies of musicians, rock encyclopedias, rock histories, record guides” and collections of articles.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁸ Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan, “Modeling Authenticity,” in *Reading Rock and Roll*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 29-30.

⁴⁹ Regev, 90.

These books and articles organized the existing body of popular music into a particular history centered around “great” or “influential” records. The histories of the 1970’s describe a trajectory from grassroots activity to art form, beginning with the development of rock ‘n’ roll by “pioneers” in the latter half of the 1950’s, and culminating in the ascendancy of the music in the latter half of the 1960’s.⁵⁰ Regev argues that, starting with this literature, the “periodization” of music – that is, the production of certain eras marked by a certain kind of music – has played a significant role in the development of a canon for rock music; for Regev, “the formulation of a history of rock involves the acts of consecration and crowning, with the relevant criteria being the evaluation of the creators and their works as musically innovative in relation to the preceding historical moment.”⁵¹ Custodians of rock history continue to debate what “great” records are, where the boundaries of eras should be placed, and how one particular era is responsive to the ones that came before it.

Ideology in Rock

Rock’s attempted transition into an autonomous art world has revealed a tension between the activity’s claim to be a mass-based, “grassroots” sound and its aspired self-image as a discipline “based in the traditional ideology of ‘superior reality’ of art and of the autonomous creative ‘genius.’”⁵² Whereas Bourdieu’s model envisions aesthetics as a top-down process, wherein autonomous art worlds create their own aesthetic ideals, are imitated by the population-at-large, and then

⁵⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁵¹ Ibid., 93.

develop new “untainted” aesthetic codes, rock music has both “top-down” and “bottom-up” influences.⁵³ Heinz-Deiter Meyer, in a work describing “taste formation in pluralistic societies,” argues that this two-way process marks aesthetic judgments in the United States; contends Meyer: “Taste formation answers to different forces in different institutional and social contexts. It is essentially a local phenomenon.”⁵⁴

Meyer argues that evaluation of any novel item – be it a painting, a song, or a new style of jeans – depends on existing “rhetorics” about how to interpret the item.⁵⁵ In pluralistic societies, particularly the United States,⁵⁶ the two main rhetorics are the “rhetoric of refinement” – characteristic of Bourdieu’s FRP – and the “rhetoric of authenticity,” which frames aesthetic judgments as inherently personal rather than inculcated through education.⁵⁷ Meyer traces this latter rhetoric to Rousseau:

By basing his discourse on the idea of natural man (who, however, is corruptible by civilization), Rousseau arrives at a rhetoric of taste that [that] challenge[s] the aristocratic monopoly on taste by arguing that ‘true taste’ is natural and accessible to all men, not just an exclusive few, that its object is the pleasure of the greatest number, not whimsical distinctions arrived at by connoisseurs, and that delicacy and refinement are corruptions rather than articulations of good taste.⁵⁸

This ideal, then, directly refutes the central assumptions of the autonomous art world: that only a select few can properly interpret work and that accessibility,

⁵² Ibid., 86.

⁵³ Heinz-Dieter Meyer, “Taste Formation in Pluralistic Societies: The Role of Rhetorics and Institutions,” *International Sociology* 15 (2000), 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 33 and 36

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36

⁵⁶ Meyer cites France, on which Bourdieu bases his study, as a country where the “rhetoric of refinement” dominates the “rhetoric of authenticity.” Thus, according to Meyer, one should expect American art worlds to be less autonomous than their French counterparts due to the former’s emphasis on the “rhetoric of authenticity” and the latter’s “long tradition of taste-as-refinement sedimented in aristocratically dominated institutions.” Ibid., 52.

rather than learned aesthetic codes, defines great works. Meyer ultimately concludes that these two rhetorics “organize and structure” how we understand cultural goods; these rhetorics are “what we see with.”⁵⁹

Simon Frith, a sociologist and rock critic, constructs a similar model arguing for three sources of “evaluative discourse.”⁶⁰ Frith’s “bourgeois” taste public, analogous to Meyer’s “rhetoric of refinement” “has been institutionalized in universities” and portrays music as a “transcendent experience that is, on the one hand, ineffable, and on the other, only available to those with the right sort of knowledge, the right sort of interpretive skills.” This discourse dominates the aesthetic judgments of Bourdieu’s FRP and limits the proper experiencing of music to “the right people with the right training.”⁶¹

The second discourse Frith identifies is that of “folk music,” which stresses authenticity, the importance of tradition, and the importance of ritual.⁶² Like Meyer’s rhetoric of authenticity, this discourse understands music as both a “participatory” and mass-based “subjective meaningful experience.”⁶³ “Folk music” involves rituals such as festivals where artists socialize with the concertgoers and the concertgoers effectively join the artist on stage by singing along with the acts; the result, argues Frith, is “an integration of art and life.” Frith also proposes a third discourse, that of the “commercial music world,”

⁵⁷ Ibid., 33 and 41

⁵⁸ Ibid., 41

⁵⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁰ Simon Frith. “What is Good Music?” *Canadian University Music Review* 10 (1990), 97-8

⁶¹ Ibid., 98

⁶² Ibid., 98

⁶³ Ibid., 99.

wherein the “musical value and monetary value are equated.”⁶⁴ This third discourse maps onto the concept of art-as-commodity proposed by Bourdieu.

Rock, then, exists at the intersection of these three aesthetic discourses: a folk art analyzed with the vocabulary of high culture that is packaged as a commercial product. The history of rock has been written as an interplay between these three “competing” discourses, and particularly as a struggle by “serious” listeners to exorcise the commercial elements from the other two.⁶⁵ Regev argues that the folk ideal of authenticity constitutes the foundation of the rock aesthetic; rock has been colored, in contrast to high art forms, as an activity that “grows from ‘below,’ from the daily reality of its musicians and audiences.”⁶⁶

Consequently, evaluations of whether the music authentically reflects the life of the artist underlie judgments of the artistic value of rock records, and suspicions that an artist’s sound is “deliberately stimulated mass market” form a critical component of the evaluation of a record’s value.⁶⁷

The folk discourse’s Romantic conception of art as expressing some higher inner truth and its wariness of the influence of commercialism parallel the key concepts of the rhetoric of refinement. Regev argues that the high brow ideology of art, which the rock world has come to adopt, is based on three criteria. First, to be hailed as “art,” the cultural good must exhibit both “formal-aesthetic sophistication or genuineness,” and “philosophical, social, psychological or

⁶⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁵ Simon Frith, *Performance Rites*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. p. 42.

⁶⁶ Regev, “Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,” 86.

⁶⁷ Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music* (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 250

emotional mentions.”⁶⁸ Second, the work must be inspired by some “spirit and ‘inner truth’” in its creator, and, third, the piece must be produced with “some commitment to that ‘inner truth,’ beyond considerations of practicality and usefulness – the ideological theme of ‘art for art’s sake.’”⁶⁹ As such, both the folk and high art discourses stress the need for a cultural good to distance itself from its use as a commodity.

Thus while the folk and highbrow discourses may agree that commerce should play no role in art, these two rhetorics disagree sharply about the sources of aesthetic appeal and how accessible works should be to the initiated. While highbrow culture argues that art should instead reflect the aesthetic ideals developed by the autonomous art world, folk art demands that works should amount to an aesthetic representation of the subjective reality of the daily lives of average individuals. Such tensions complicate the aesthetics of rock music by, on the one hand, stressing the desirability of novel and complex/intricate techniques while, on the other hand, emphasizing the necessity of abandoning pretension and representing the sensibilities of a mass audience. Particularly problematic is the tension between the folk discourse’s praise of communal/mass-based elements of rock and the highbrow discourse’s claims that art’s accessibility is indicative of aesthetic compromise to the demands of the market. For example, a critic might frame a wildly popular record, on the one hand, as tapping into the zeitgeist of the era, capturing some real elements affecting the lives of the masses or, on the other

⁶⁸ Regev, “Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,” 86.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

hand, as a carefully marketed sound, designed to appeal to as many people as possible and be profitable for the record label and artist.

Kembrew McLeod's study of the rhetoric adopted by critics to evaluate popular music notes reveals how the interaction between rock's two dominant and contradictory discourses complicates the evaluation of music. McLeod finds that, for example, evaluations of authenticity are most often framed in terms of "rawness" – that is, having 'primitive,' 'stark,' 'savage' or 'brutal' qualities"; however, the "flipside of 'rawness,' sophistication, [is] a trait that is equally revered by rock critics (that is, unless a critic is writing about 'overproduced,' 'polished' pop)."⁷⁰ Similarly, McLeod observes that "simplicity – even stupidity – is seen as a virtue" in some contexts and, conversely, "sophistication and intelligence can be equally valorized in other circumstances," with charges of "vapid simplicity" and "banality" being leveled against music which fails to exhibit such cleverness.⁷¹

As a result of these internal conflicts, the aesthetic codes of rock amount to a contradiction, a series of clashing norms that are ultimately mediated in a local manner, on a case-by-case basis, by the agents and institutions that constitute the activity. While competing orthodoxies mark any art world, the incongruous foundations of rock's claim as *art* either doom the activity to a particularly incoherent value system or bless the activity with an aesthetic code containing tremendous subtleties. In either case, the interpreters of rock find tremendous leeway in evaluation of the works. Ultimately, how any one agent

⁷⁰ Kembrew McLeod, "One and a Half Stars: a Critique of Rock Criticism in North America," *Popular Music*, Volume 20-1 (2001), 54.

locates a piece in the tangled ideology of rock has an important impact on how other agents interpret the music. Although one may argue that there are real distinctions between “raw” authenticity and oversimplification, given the ambiguity of musical “stimuli,” the potential that such judgments are ultimately guided by how others have framed the music is particularly high.⁷²

Indeed, a series of studies have found that how a person interprets a piece of music varies depending upon the information he is given about it. In a paper on the influence of a social setting on listening to music, Ray Crozier notes that researchers have found that listeners not only like music more or less based upon how the music is framed, but they also hear it differently. Crozier cites a study by Chapman and Williams in which participants who expressed a fondness for “progressive pop” and an “antipathy towards ‘serious’” music were either told they were going to hear a clip of “progressive pop” or “serious” music or they were not told anything about the piece at all. Although all three groups heard the same clip, the manner in which the music was framed influenced how much the participants liked the music as well as *what* they heard in the music; participants’ ratings of descriptive elements of the music varied by group.⁷³ Crozier notes that, although the findings are “tentative,” the results display “a cognitive reorganization of the material being judged, that is to say, the meaning of the music has changed.”⁷⁴ What’s important here is that how one agent frames music to another may not only impact whether that agent likes it, but how they interpret

⁷¹ Ibid., 54-55.

⁷² W. Ray Crozier, “Music and Social Influence,” *Social Psychology of Music*, ed. David Hargreaves and Adrian North (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70.

⁷³ Crozier, “Music and Social Influence,” 70.

the music's basic properties. Considering the fine line between "raw" and "vapidly simple," the social organization of the rock community – how individuals communicate aspects of the music to one another – seems crucial to an understanding of how claims of the activity mediate claims of artistic merit.

Given the flexibility of the aesthetic code, legitimizing agents within this art world possess a higher degree of discretion in the evaluation of a work – for example being able to frame a work's complexity as desirable sophistication or undesirable "overproduction" or being "too clever." However, as will be explained later in the chapter, the weakness of rock's institutions and the plethora of legitimizing agents render any particular individual's voice weak. As a result of this chorus of voices and the availability of strong cases for wildly contradicting interpretations of the same piece of music, a number of competing interpretations of a particular work, and similarly variable estimations of the cultural good's symbolic value, may flourish.

The Agents and Institutions of Rock

While there are numerous actors that shape what and how music gets produced, four main groups of agents mediate the process by which artistic value is conferred upon rock music: the music press, fans, artists, and record companies.⁷⁵ As per Bourdieu's discussion of the FRP, it is the process of consumption and circulation that produces the meaning and cultural value of a

⁷⁴ Crozier, "Music and Social Influence," 70.

⁷⁵ See Becker's *Art Worlds* for a discussion of the social process by which art is produced. The discussion here is limited to a specific type of interpretation of artwork – namely, assigning it artistic value or assessing it devoid of surplus symbolic value.

work. Each of these actors plays an important role in the production of artistic value, and each checks and balances against the other actors. The value assigned to a particular work, then, is the product of a social process – a dialogue among these agents and institutions about normative standards in rock.

The Music Press

The rock critics essentially constitute the metaphorical clergy Bourdieu ascribes to the FRP; critics are at once the educator, the museum curator, the art historian, and the member of a literary society. As such, the music press constitutes the most significant authority in the production of artistic value. As explained above, the rock press first advanced claims for the artistic value of rock and played a crucial role in the early construction of the history of rock.

Published in newspapers, music magazines, general interest magazines, books, and numerous other forms, these writers continue to play an important role in the consecration of art, the production of aesthetic standards, and the revision of rock's constantly evolving history. These writers, bolstered by their historical claims as legitimate cultural authorities, constitute a community of professional listeners hired for their expertise and able to articulate to a large number of people and codify in print their positions on various matters.

The professional position of the music writer ultimately grants her legitimacy as, in Shuker's terms, "a gatekeeper of taste and arbiter of cultural history."⁷⁶ Mark Fenster, in a piece describing the "political economy" of the rock press, argues that critics write from a "position of expertise and authority that *differentiates* them for their readers" while maintaining a position of being

“*similar to their readers.*”⁷⁷ Nathan Brackett, the current Reviews Editor of *Rolling Stone*, concurs that the music writers presumably have an expertise the average listener does not: “If the writer is doing their job right, they’re bringing a little more perspective [than the average fan], and they’re able to get at a deeper idea of whether the music really does succeed.”⁷⁸ As such, the music writer fulfills Bourdieu’s conception of the initiated audience able to make “inspired readings” of a work. This position then lends critics “monumental influence” and the “authority to present cultural products as fulfilling” criteria necessary to be bestowed with “artistic recognition.”⁷⁹ Indeed, Steve Jones and Kevin Featherly, in their “Reviewing Rock Writing,” note that “of all periodicals, *Rolling Stone* has had the power to ‘consecrate’ popular music in Bourdieu’s terms.”⁸⁰

From their privileged position, critics are able to articulate certain aesthetic values and inculcate their version of history in their readers. In reviews, rock critics are able to at once construct a history, articulate certain aesthetic values, and locate the work being reviewed in that history and aesthetic milieu. For example, the critic may reference a series of records or artists culled from rock’s history, articulate a relationship between the particular album being reviewed and those reference points, and explain the normative criteria by which

⁷⁶ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 78.

⁷⁷ Mark Fenster, “Consumer’s Guides: The Political Economy of the Music Press and the Democracy of Critical Discourse,” in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 84.

⁷⁸ Nathan Brackett, Telephone Interview with Author, February 10, 2003.

⁷⁹ Regev, “Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,” 86.

⁸⁰ Steve Jones and Kevin Featherly. “Re-Viewing Rock Writing: Narratives of Popular Music Criticism,” in *Pop Music and the Press*. Ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 20

the album should be evaluated.⁸¹ Reviewers' writing, then, serves to "imbue particular products with meaning and value, and even their internecine arguments strengthen an artist's or record's claim to being part of a selective tradition."⁸²

The influence of the writer is not limited to the readership of his weekly column. Shuker notes that the more popular "critics – and their associated magazines – have published collections of their reviews . . . [which] become bibles in the field, establishing dominant orthodoxies as to the relative value of various styles or genres and pantheons of artist."⁸³ In addition, notes McLeod, "rock critics are part of an interconnected network, a network in which it is not unusual for people to change positions, moving from one type of job to another."⁸⁴ As such, a writer might work as a publicist, find a job in "college radio," or eventually land a job as an A&R person, who scouts talent for a record company.⁸⁵ McLeod concludes by emphasizing the tremendous influence the critic's position in the network affords them; argues McLeod, "Discourses that emanate from within rock criticism are not simply isolated to the rock critic community, but the larger community of which they are a part."⁸⁶

The Fans

Critics may hold titles conferring special status upon their interpretations of rock, but fans also play a significant role in the bestowing of artistic merit on groups. Four properties of rock culture facilitate fan participation in the

⁸¹ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 96.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁴ McLeod, "One and a Half Stars: a Critique of Rock Criticism in North America," 58.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

development of rock's history and aesthetic standards: the widespread availability of rock knowledge, the social importance of rock music, the folk norms underpinning the activity, and rock's status as a commercial activity. Although critics may constitute a specially consecrated group of initiated listeners, the bar for entrance into the community of initiated listeners is lower than in established highbrow arts. One may need to attend the "right" school or university to be initiated into the aesthetic world of modern classical music, but accumulating the cultural knowledge to enter into dialogue with the "priests" of the rock world merely requires access to music magazines and CD's. With both literature and pirated music freely available on the Internet, the material constraints on this type of knowledge continue to decline.

Roy Shuker argues that knowledge-seeking of this type is an intrinsic part of youth culture.⁸⁷ Shuker cites a finding that in the United States almost 81 percent of the students cited music as an important part of their lives and argues that "interest in rock music" constitutes "one factor youth have in common."⁸⁸ As a consequence, contends Shuker, "'young people's musical activities, whatever their cultural background or social position, rest on a substantial and sophisticated body of knowledge about popular music."⁸⁹ Young people, in Shuker's estimation, are able to differentiate genres and "to hear and place sounds in terms of their histories, influences and sources."⁹⁰ Argues Shuker, buying music "means gathering information from peers, older siblings, and retrospectives in the

⁸⁷ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 230-245

⁸⁸ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 230 and Weinstein 1991:107, cited in Shuker.

⁸⁹ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 230 and Weinstein 1991:107, cited in Shuker.

⁹⁰ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 230.

music press; and systemically searching for items out of the back catalogue.”⁹¹

Shuker also finds from research he conducted in New Zealand, that “older students” taste includes a greater variety of noncommercial music than their younger counterparts and that such students speak of “diversifying their musical preferences.”⁹²

Shuker identifies a subtype of fan, which he labels the “aficionado,” who exhibits interest in rock “at more of an intellectual level and focused on the music per se rather than on the persona of the performer(s).”⁹³ Fans who fall into this category view themselves “as ‘serious’ devotees” and constitute the “large numbers of young people now do their own archaeologies of popular music history to particular musical styles or performers.”⁹⁴ These fans engage in what Shuker terms “secondary involvement” in the music by reading “fanzines and commercial magazines,” attending concerts, and displaying an interest not only in bands but also in “record labels and producers.”⁹⁵ These aficionados, who display cultural knowledge on par with critics, “have no hesitation about making justifying judgments about meaning and value.”⁹⁶

Thus, while in highbrow culture a select few have access to the knowledge necessary to make distinctions in the music, in the realm of popular music, learning the aesthetic codes is an integral part of growing up. Indeed, Fenster argues that fans today have learned the vocabulary of the critic and are able to

⁹¹ Ibid., 235.

⁹² Ibid., 234.

⁹³ Ibid., 243.

⁹⁴ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 243 and Willis (1981), cited in Shuker.

⁹⁵ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 243.

⁹⁶ Willis, et. Al 1990: 59, quoted in Shuker, p. 230.

utilize this language to “perform the function of the critic.”⁹⁷ To highlight this point, Fenster relates an anecdote wherein a music critic arrived late to a concert and, having missed the opening act, relied on fan accounts to write his piece; the story printed in the paper the next day, a collage of fan accounts, seemed no different from any other review. Unfortunately for this writer, the opening band had never arrived, and the fan accounts merely parroted back the vocabulary of rock criticism they had internalized.⁹⁸ Fenster concludes that with the widespread ability to exercise rock knowledge “we are all, to a certain degree, critics” due to the “critical discourse” that permeates our day-to-day lives, “entering into our . . . conversations with others and into our own evaluation of music we hear on radio and television, as well as our own stereos.”⁹⁹ As a consequence, Fenster concludes, “music criticism and canon construction are everywhere.”¹⁰⁰

The second fan-empowering attribute of rock is its communal nature, resulting in social networks that bolster novel aesthetic claims. In his article “Birds of a Feather Sing Together,” Noah Mark argues that music preferences spread through social interaction; argues Mark “people develop musical tastes similar to those of the people with whom they interact,” particularly via “kin and close friends.”¹⁰¹ Thus, those within the same social networks ultimately come to share similar tastes, as individuals hear one another’s music and exchange knowledge about this shared music. George Lewis concurs with Mark in his

⁹⁷ Fenster, “Consumers’ Guides: The Political Economy of the Music Press and the Democracy of Critical Discourse,” 89.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰¹ Noah Mark, “Birds of a Feather Sing Together,” *Social Forces* 77 (Dec 1998), 454.

discussion of music taste, arguing that “the central fact is that we pretty much listen to, and enjoy, the same music that is listened to by other people we like or with whom we identify.”¹⁰² Lewis argues that “bits of musical trivia are hoarded and exchanged” between friends and this “kind of musical knowledge” ultimately constitutes a type of “cultural knowledge that has deep social implications.”¹⁰³

Not only do social groups shape music preferences, but musical preferences, acting as a symbol of identity, come to impact the formation of social groups. With popular music playing a significant role in our daily social interactions, especially among youth, one finds that music acts as an important signal of identity, and consequently that social groups tend to adopt similar tastes in music. Among adolescents, Lewis finds a tendency to “constantly check out the music collections of their influential friends and of newcomers seeking admission to their group (to see if they ‘fit’).”¹⁰⁴ Lewis concludes that “music preference, then, is a powerful cultural signal” – an important “means of showing others (and ourselves) to what cultural group, or groups, we belong or aspire to belong.”¹⁰⁵ Lewis also cites studies by David Reisman and Simon Frith that reveal adolescents to “use popular music to create socially shared meanings and common states of awareness,” “to define” their groups and to serve as a “source for determining and achieving in-group status.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² George Lewis, “Who Do You Love? The Dimensions of Musical Taste” in *Popular Music and Communication*. Ed. James Lull. 1987. 137

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 137

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 135

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 137

Social networking built upon shared music may ultimately yield a subculture¹⁰⁷ of sorts, a coherent set of aesthetic ideals backed by a robust social apparatus. Dolf Zillmann and Su-lin Gan argue that groups formed around certain aesthetic ideals – centered on a genre, a constellation of groups, or even a single group, such as the “deadhead” fans of the Grateful Dead – are able to “define themselves as members of a cultural elite (in their own perception) and attain the emotional gratification of belonging, [while] defin[ing] themselves as distinct and different from other peer groups and attain[ing] the gratifications of being somehow superior (in their own perception).”¹⁰⁸ As such, the group finds itself in a position to advance its aesthetic conceptions while portraying themselves as priests of their own refined orthodoxy, though of course the aesthetic itself may be anything but refined (as was the case of the punk networks of London in the mid-to-late 1970s). Ultimately, this clustering effect reveals the ability for aesthetically-minded individuals to organize themselves and successfully make claims on the aesthetic codes of rock.

A third, and related, property of rock culture that empowers fans to shape the ideology and history of rock is the activity’s grassroots ideals. Although the rock community may put its writer-scholars on a pedestal, rock’s folk ideals lead the activity to oppose elitism, and, as such, efforts exist within the rock

¹⁰⁷ “Subcultural” here is not used in the traditional sense to indicate an oppositional stance to mainstream culture, but rather is used to denote a unique set of aesthetic ideals particular to the group. Shuker argues that a poor correlation exists between subculture and aesthetic taste – while music may be important to some subcultures, for others there may not be a set of aesthetic values to accompany the non-aesthetic ones, and conversely, some subcultures may have a strong set of aesthetic values but may not display “oppositional values.” (Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 237)

¹⁰⁸ Dolf Zillmann and Su-lin Gan. “Musical Taste in Adolescence.” *Social Psychology of Music*, ed. David Hargreaves and Adrian North (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 172.

community to reign in and discredit those interpreters, be they writers or aficionados, who attempt to *fully* distance themselves from mass opinion in a move analogous to the FRP's autonomous art sphere. Reflecting the inevitable tensions between folk and highbrow ideologies, artistic interpretation at once privileges certain readings of the music while simultaneously demanding that those privileged readings take into account the voices of the masses. Brackett argues that bands that can remain popular for "5 or 10 years" earn "a grudging respect no matter" how they have been reviewed by critics; Brackett notes, "You see it again and again throughout the history of *Rolling Stone* and pop music."¹⁰⁹ Brackett cites bands initially blasted by critics, such as AC/DC or Led Zeppelin, who, though still lampooned by critics today, are nonetheless "inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame."¹¹⁰ The process reveals that while the connoisseurs of rock may attempt to forge a more sophisticated reading of rock music, ultimately, the legitimacy of their decisions are dependent upon the approval of the rock community at large.

The fourth and final factor that empowers fans is rock's status as a commercial enterprise. Aside from the ideological reasons to hear fans' voices, writers ultimately produce a good that needs consumers. While special interest magazines can cater to the aficionado and daily newspapers' bottom lines ultimately are not affected by whether the average individual agrees with the critic, general interest music magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* may perhaps feel this pressure. Brackett argues that the popularity of a band does not

¹⁰⁹ Brackett, telephone interview.

¹¹⁰ Brackett, telephone interview.

necessarily influence how an album is reviewed in *Rolling Stone* but that more popular acts will be covered more in other areas of the magazine or will have their albums reviewed more prominently, though this position of course does not assure them a more positive review.¹¹¹ Indeed, new, popular commercial acts are often hounded by the music press.

Fan power, then, stems partly from the fans' role as consumers of writings of the music press and partly from rock's idealization of art as a grassroots phenomenon. Because commercial success and massively popular cultural phenomena coincide, however, it is difficult to tease these two apart. In any case, the judgments of the masses, though perhaps lacking the refined aesthetic codes developed by critics, ultimately limit the autonomy of the highbrow elements within rock and help to guide the process by which a record or an artist is consecrated as part of the canon.

Artists

As in the FRP, artists play an important role in the construction of rock's history and in the consecration of works. Artists influence the meaning-creation process in several distinct ways. As producers, artists are in a position to cast their work as being part of a certain tradition. By framing their work in a particular manner, the artist can make claims about the place of their work in the orthodoxy. Such a process not only influences how *their* work is viewed; this process also constructs a history as the band often locates itself in a certain tradition. Much like the critics, who are members of a profession claiming an expertise on musical

¹¹¹ Brackett, telephone interview.

knowledge, artists have particular authority to make claims about aesthetic codes and the history of rock.

Artists also act as consecrating agents through their constructions of traditions. Bands give a great number of interviews as they tour the country, providing them plenty of opportunity to place their views in print. Of particular interest in rock music is the notion of musical influences, and as such, artists are placed in a position to act as “reputational entrepreneurs” for the acts in which they find meaning.¹¹² Roni Sarig, in his *The Secret History of Rock*, argues that early 90’s bands such as Nirvana and Sonic Youth “made a point of name-dropping the groups that had inspired them.”¹¹³ As a result of such references, “little known names like Half Japanese, Glenn Branca, Wire, and Can began popping up regularly in the pages of major magazines”; thus “young fans” of popular bands of this era became exposed to a new set of bands.¹¹⁴ These acts, then, earned a second chance at consecration. Indeed, Sarig’s book itself, a collection of quotes from artists about their favorite “underground” bands, serves an important role in consecrating acts that have been overlooked in the construction of the rock canon thus far. In this way, the artist can act as a

¹¹² Gary Alan Fine, “Reputational Entrepreneurs and the Memory of Incompetence: Melting Supporters, Partisan Warriors, and Images of President Harding.” *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (March 1996): 1159-1193. In this piece, Fine develops the notion of “reputational entrepreneurs,” individuals who promote a certain vision of another individual and guide the collective memory of that individual in a certain manner. Fine’s case study is President Harding; the piece traces the various agents who have advocated on behalf of and against Harding throughout history. Fine concludes that the current conventional wisdom about Harding as a below-average president results from the success of detractors in forwarding a negative image of Harding rather than Harding being, in some objective sense, below-average in his performance.

¹¹³ Roni Sarig, *The Secret History of Rock* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998), 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2

particularly vocal and influential “fan,” advancing her favorite band’s claims of artistic merit.

Record Companies

Having a financial interest in seeing their acts succeed, record companies also play a considerable role shaping the interpretation and evaluation of artists and records. Record companies set into motion “circulation and consumption” of a record, sending off the album along with promotional materials and advertisement campaigns. Consequently, record companies play a significant role in locating the band in rock’s landscape through materials sent to the music writers and radio stations. For example, in his investigation of how cultural industries cope with the uncertainty with which cultural products are received, Paul Hirsch has found that record companies may find it more cost-effective to target “autonomous gatekeepers, or ‘surrogate consumers’ such as disk jockeys, film critics and book reviewers employed by mass-media organizations” rather than the population-at-large.¹¹⁵ Cultural industries, then, can frame their cultural goods in a particular light – as having a certain type of symbolic meaning or fitting into a particular tradition – to the “fashion experts and opinion leaders for their respective constituencies.”¹¹⁶ However, the mistrust of commercial enterprises ultimately undercuts the influence of these record companies on agents and institutions that aim to separate art from commerce.

¹¹⁵ Paul Morris Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions: an Organization-set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems,” *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (January 1972), 639-659.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3: THE MUSIC PRESS AFTER THE “ALTERNATIVE REVOLUTION”

This chapter aims to provide a background for types of judgments made by the music press about Weezer since the mid-1990's. In the following pages, I will further explore the culture of music criticism, including a discussion of how recent historical developments in popular music have impacted the ideology that guides the descriptive and normative elements of music criticism. I begin by constructing a widely-shared account of the rise of the “alternative rock” music scene of the 1990's, discussing the ways in which its cultural attributes and aesthetic norms impacted the practice of music criticism. I then use this historical background to describe some of the different perspectives that have developed within the music press and to explain what types of judgments critics of the 1990's made about music. This sketch will then enable me to put in context the various interpretations of Weezer's music developed in chapter four.

The Counter-Counter-Culture

In the mid-1970's, rock experienced a counter-cultural movement of its own with the rise of punk rock. Taking its cues from the raw garage-rock sound of the early 1970's, punk emerged in both England and the United States as a reaction to increasingly commercial rock music, which represented the remnants of the previous generation's music. The punk movement arose from disparate sources – on the one hand, art school students in avant-garde and performance art and, on the other, disaffected youth coming of age at a time of economic and

political turmoil. Punk music was fast, loud, simple and often inaccessible – a mix of brash guitars, simple parts, and a focus on attitude.¹¹⁷ Although some bands, such as the Buzzcocks, remained apolitical, many strains of the punk movement were alternately nihilistic or politically vocal, espousing left-wing politics, and often maintaining an angry tone – both musically and culturally.¹¹⁸

Out of this punk explosion of the latter half of the 1970's emerged two somewhat distinct subgenres: new wave and hardcore. A more accessible offspring of punk, new wave maintained the simplicity of punk while largely taking on the form of pop music.¹¹⁹ Many of the artists of this genre began to experiment with synthesizers, which served as a contrast to new wave's guitar-centric precursor. New wave music, as an accessible cousin to the punk scene, ultimately achieved a significant degree of commercial success in the late 1970's and early 1980's with hits by bands such as The Cars, who represented the more mainstream end of the genre, and Duran Duran, whose synthesizer-based pop and MTV presence earned them a moderate degree of commercial success.¹²⁰ The flipside of new wave was hardcore music, which developed in the United States in the early 1980's. Rather than appealing to pop sensibilities, hardcore music emphasized the aspects of punk that distinguished the genre: the music was “impossibly fast, the vocals were shouted, the riffs were simple, and the records

¹¹⁷ *All Music Guide*. “Punk.”

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=3:47:52|PM&sql=C204>

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ *All Music Guide*. “New Wave.”

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=3:52:09|PM&sql=C381>

¹²⁰ *Ibid*.

looked (and sounded) like they were made in someone's basement."¹²¹ Whereas new wave music was embraced by commercial radio, hardcore music remained a localized phenomenon supported by cliques of disaffected young people.

Without the support of commercial interests, these hardcore bands established for themselves "a shadow record industry, complete with independent labels, recording studios, distribution networks, radio stations (mostly college), record stores, nightclubs, newspapers and magazines."¹²² Artists in this context would not only establish a band, but they might also develop their own label on which to release their records.¹²³ "The key principle of American indie rock," according to music writer Michael Azerrad, "was the punk ethos of DIY, or do-it-yourself."¹²⁴ While bands often created record labels for the sole purpose of releasing their own records, occasionally bands developed labels to put out the records of other local or like-minded bands. Black Flag, for example, created the SST label, which released records by a series of acts now recognized as part of the American Underground canon: the Minutemen, the Meat Puppets, Husker Du, and Dinosaur Jr.¹²⁵ Such labels, independent of corporate influence, came to be known as "indies," a key concept of the American Underground scene. Freelance music journalist Gina Arnold argues that without radio play or MTV support, these groups had no choice but to "do it themselves," ultimately developing a

¹²¹ *All Music Guide*. "Hardcore Punk."

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=4:18:24|PM&sql=C368>

¹²² Michael Norman, "Nirvana Credited with Giving New Life to the Rock Scene," *The Plain Dealer*, October 31, 1993.

¹²³ Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *All Music Guide*. "American Underground."

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=6:37:05|PM&sql=C12147>

network that “had its own stars, its own journalists and consumer outlets and nightclubs.”¹²⁶

The “indie” scene ultimately expanded well beyond the hardcore sound, which, however, remained central to the scene. By 1987, a time when the commercial record industry began paying greater attention to the underground scene, the indie scene was supporting a wide range of sounds: “underground blues, thrash metal, experimental country-rock, protest music and fusions of every description.”¹²⁷ Reyne Cuccurro, a former editor for the New York-based *Rockpool* and currently an independent label executive, told the *Boston Globe* in 1989 that independent labels were driven by “aesthetic” rather than commercial concerns: “At indies, the thought of immediate profits or shareholder return is not an issue. It’s more a case of aesthetics. If you can find somebody who likes what you do, you can get it out on an indie label.”¹²⁸ Similarly, the fortunes of college radio, unlike that of commercial stations, did not depend on advertising, and thus college stations could play a wide range of less accessible music.¹²⁹ As such, the underground scene was able to support a variety of music while priding itself, in both the folk and highbrow traditions, on putting artistic concerns over commercial ones.

The flipside of this privileging of “artistic concerns,” however, was that indies were often strapped for cash and could only provide limited “distribution,

¹²⁶ Gina Arnold quoted in Norman, “Nirvana Credited with Giving New Life to the Rock Scene.”

¹²⁷ Morse, Steve, “Growing Number of ‘Indies’ Offer More Adventure on Vinyl,” *Boston Globe*, September 27, 1987.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Michele Marcucci, “Lollapalooza As Alternative Rock’s Biggest Roadshow Swings our Way,” *Buffalo News*, July 9, 1993.

promotion, and publicity” for their records.¹³⁰ Consequently, the artists themselves often faced financial hardships, and towards the latter half of the 1980’s, as major labels became increasingly interested in the alternative scene, a few acts signed on with the majors, believing they could reach a larger audience.¹³¹ After majors expressed interest in the Athens and Minneapolis scenes, home to the Replacements and Husker Du, industry buzz focused in on the Seattle scene in early 1989.¹³² Interest in the Seattle branch of the alternative scene was jumpstarted by an article in the “trend-defining British magazine *Melody Maker*,” which hailed Seattle indie-label Sub Pop as a “lifeforce to the most vibrant, kicking music scene encompassed in one city for at least 10 years.”¹³³ Following similar endorsements by a host of influential sources – John Peel’s BBC Radio One DJ program, *New Musical Express*, *Spin* and the *Village Voice* – Seattle became hailed as the “new Liverpool or the new Haight-Ashbury.”¹³⁴ By this time, major labels were developing their own “‘alternative music’ divisions and negotiating licensing deals with the independent labels that often sign[ed]” the underground acts.¹³⁵ In the subsequent months, a series of bands from Seattle were signed by major labels including Sonic Youth, Nirvana, and Pearl Jam. The recession of 1990 hastened this process by leaving “several indie labels crumbling

¹³⁰ Jim Sullivan, “Big Labels Courting ‘Alternative Bands,’” *Boston Globe*, September 24, 1989.

¹³¹ *Melody Maker* quoted in Sullivan, “Big Labels Courting ‘Alternative Bands.’”

¹³² Michael Walker, “Puget Sound,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1992.

¹³³ Boss, Kit. “Young, Loud and Snotty – All Right Who are these Local Guys who Have the Avant Garde Music Press Swooning?” *The Seattle Times*. August 24, 1989. p. F1

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Sullivan, “Big Labels Courting ‘Alternative Bands.’”

[and] underground bands . . . actively seeking the secure umbrella of major labels.”¹³⁶

This transformation from underground to mainstream was cemented on January 11, 1992, when Nirvana’s *Nevermind* album reached number one on the Billboard charts, replacing Michael Jackson’s *Dangerous*. Described by critics as a seminal moment in which “rock [had] entered a new era,” this chart placement stood as the first time that the “alternative scene” had produced the best-selling record in the country.¹³⁷ With its unprecedented chart success, Nirvana came to be regarded as both a commercial and cultural force. Azerrad, who wrote a book on Nirvana, argues that the band came to epitomize a new commercial opportunity for record companies to connect with the “twentysomethings, also known as Generation X,” who actively sought out music and were now old enough to have disposable income with which to buy albums.¹³⁸ Record companies agreed with such an assessment and rushed to fill this apparently significant market whose needs had not been filled by mainstream music in the tradition of baby-boomer rock.¹³⁹ Labels became obsessed with finding the “next Nirvana” and began the chase to sign the next alternative rock superstar. By 1993, industry executives were attending sessions on “A&R (artist and repertoire) Post-Nirvana” and “Marketing Pre- and Post-Nirvana.”¹⁴⁰ As *Chicago Tribune* critic Greg Kot put it, “Promising bands with the requisite sound (buzzing guitars,

¹³⁶ Michael Corcoran, “Bands Leave Underground Without Going Commercial,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 22, 1991.

¹³⁷ Norman, “Nirvana Credited with Giving New Life to the Rock Scene.”

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Harriet McLeod, “Nirvana’s Flame Carries the Torch for Generation X,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 7, 1993.

alienated lyrics) and slacker image were being hunted down and signed with brutal efficiency by major labels.¹⁴¹

By the end of 1994, the underground sound of the 1980's essentially had become the mainstream. Most of the still existent acts of the alternative scene were signed to major labels, and modern rock radio stations dedicated to playing alternative music had been established and drew significant listenership in many cities across the country. The success of these stations was tremendous; modern rock station listenership increased fourfold between 1991-1994.¹⁴² Ron Gonzales, a music critic for the *Albuquerque Journal*, argues that 1994 marked the “ending of a time when indie labels had presence and a trademark”; indeed, at the time Kot warned that the “indie network [was] in danger of disintegrating completely as major labels comb[ed] the ranks for the next big thing, often plucking promising bands at the first signs of success.”¹⁴³

The Alternative Revolution and the Music Press

This alternative rock revolution had a tremendous impact on the evaluation of music as art. Alternative rock, in its previous incarnation as the underground scene, had developed its own aesthetic code, its own conception of rock stardom, and its own ideals. By 1994, the ethos of the alternative music community had come into direct conflict with that of the mainstream rock world against which the underground scene had pitted itself. The music press, however,

¹⁴¹ Greg Kot, “Outside in Dazed and Confused, The Fringe Becomes the Mainstream,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 1, 1995.

¹⁴² Eric Boehlert, “Modern Rock Radio Roars Ahead,” *Billboard*, November 5, 1994.

¹⁴³ Ron Gonzales in an electronic correspondence with author, February 11, 2003, and Greg Kot. “Outside in Dazed and Confused, The Fringe Becomes the Mainstream.” *Chicago Tribune*. January 1, 1995.

had been largely supportive of the alternative rock movement. Many critics – young ones in particular – hailed the alternative movement, which had embodied the notion of an autonomous art world wherein the creative impulses of the artist rather than commercial considerations drove the creative process.

The alternative scene also resurrected the notion that some music was indeed more authentic than others. Anthony DeCurtis, a senior writer for *Rolling Stone*, argues that by the mid-1980's "To make a claim of authenticity for something was certainly unhip and also something that was regarded as unproveable, kind of raising up a non-relevant notion. The notion of authenticity had been so thoroughly disparaged that no one could legitimately claim it for anybody, it seemed."¹⁴⁴ However, the alternative scene appeared to inspire in some writers hope that some music was indeed more genuine than others. For example, *Boston Globe* critic Steve Morse argued in a 1987 piece on the underground rock scene that although the music may be "less sonically appealing due to budgetary constraints in the studio, . . . the musical inspiration tends to be more genuine."¹⁴⁵ Because of the scene's opposition to commercialism and insistence that aesthetics dictate production, many writers felt the underground music reflected the genuine concerns and ideas of its artists.

There emerged a sense that the alternative music scene was an authentic cultural expression of a generation in the same way that artists of the late 1960's had been understood to represent the voice of the Baby Boomers. Azerrad explains this Generation X as being "ignored by the media, force-fed a diet of

¹⁴⁴ Anthony DeCurtis, telephone interview with author, January 27, 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Morse, "Growing Number of 'Indies' Offer More Adventure on Vinyl."

retro-culture” by the “mighty Baby Boom generation.”¹⁴⁶ Azerrad, at the height of the alternative revolution in 1992, trumpeted the notion that the alternative music scene represented Generation X’s project during the 1980’s to “build their own cultural sandbox in the Baby Boomers’ backyard; unable to find rock ‘n’ roll to call their own, they invented it.”¹⁴⁷

In addition to reviving a traditional notion of authenticity, the underground movement rejected the traditional understandings of rock stardom. By the late 1980’s mainstream rock deified the rock star and the rock star lifestyle; part of the experience of rock music had explicitly become the image of the rock star. In the 1970’s “arena rock” developed as a branch of guitar-centered rock music whose artists achieved a level of popularity that allowed them play concerts in arena-sized venues.¹⁴⁸ Throughout the 1980’s the caricature of the arena rock star – who partied hard, engaged in conspicuous consumption, and flaunted his popularity – grew even more extreme with the development of “hair metal,” a scene which borrowed the “pop heavy metal” derived from arena rock and matched the sound with “flashy clothing, heavy makeup, and large, teased hair.”¹⁴⁹ However, the alternative movement’s conception of the artist was directly at odds with this image of the rock star. Azerrad argues that this paradox of being an impoverished yet celebrated musician fundamentally shaped the ethos of the underground scene:

¹⁴⁶ Walker, “Puget Sound.”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ *All Music Guide*. “Arena Rock.”

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=4:03:53|PM&sql=C2694>

¹⁴⁹ *All Music Guide*. “Hair Metal.”

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=4:04:22|PM&sql=C2693>

The breakthrough realization that you didn't have to be a blow-dried guitar god to be a valid rock musician ran deep; it was liberating on many levels, especially from what many perceived as the selfishness, greed and arrogance of Reagan's America. The indie underground made a modest way of life not just attractive but a downright moral imperative.¹⁵⁰

Rock stardom, in the conventional sense, was vilified as being part of the commercial world that the indie defined itself against. As such, with the ideal of the alternative rocker and mainstream rockstar clashing, one of the central norms of the rock genre – the glorified rock god – came under direct fire.

Of course, as alternative music caught on and supplanted mainstream rock as the most popular form of rock music, these former underground musicians found themselves to be rock stars.¹⁵¹ This contradiction between the values inherent to the alternative movement and the reality of alternative rock stardom often led artists to use irony, a staple of the college scene, to resolve this paradox. For example, Kurt Cobain, the lead singer of Nirvana who ultimately sold 10 million records, posed for the cover of *Rolling Stone* wearing a hand-made shirt, in the DIY tradition, reading “corporate magazines still suck.”¹⁵² Kot has noted that by 1994 the alternative scene was composed of a “new generation of rock stars trying its best not to be rock stars”; while ultimately the contradiction between rock stardom and Cobain's own values contributed to the turmoil culminating in his April 1994 suicide, Kot found that others such as Beck, who had a hit with his song “Loser,” “laughed out loud” at the oxymoronic “alternative rockstar.”¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, 8.

¹⁵¹ Kot, “Outside in Dazed and Confused, The Fringe Becomes the Mainstream.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

In addition, the success of alternative music increased the audience for alternative publications. Thus, when alternative music broke into the mainstream, there was parallel coverage by these specialty or subculture magazines. The mainstream press (e.g. daily newspaper writers) had formerly been discouraged from extensively writing about alternative acts, due to a perceived lack of reader interest.¹⁵⁴ Tom Moon, music critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, argues that prior to the alternative rock revolution, mainstream publications covered the underground scene only inasmuch as “an early warning device” about what was coming next in rock.¹⁵⁵ Joe Harrington, a writer for a number of papers including the *Boston Phoenix* and the *New York Press* and the author of a history of rock titled *Sonic Cool*, adds that excitement over the triumph of underground music led some young people to take up music writing as a profession, resulting in a cohort of writers inspired by the alternative sound.¹⁵⁶

The Norms of the Music Press after the “Alternative Revolution”

To develop a better understanding of the current state of the music press, I conducted a survey of 150 music writers writing for daily newspapers and weekly entertainment papers throughout the United States.¹⁵⁷ The writers in the survey represented a number of different positions in the music press. Fourteen percent of respondents were pop music critics, 17 percent were freelance music writers (who might write music articles for a variety of publications), 11 percent were

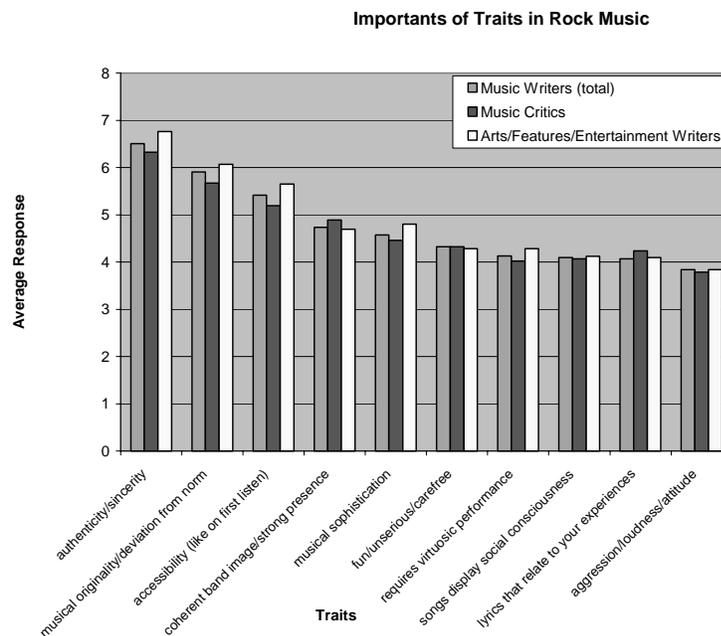
¹⁵⁴ Thor Christensen, telephone interview with author, March 10, 2003.

¹⁵⁵ Tom Moon, telephone interview with author, March 11, 2003.

¹⁵⁶ Joe Harrington, telephone interview with author, March 11, 2003.

¹⁵⁷ 246 were contacted for participation in the study; of these 150 responded to the survey. Another 15 writers responded that they either did not have time to participate in the study or did not feel qualified to participate in the study due to limited experience writing about music.

music editors, 8 percent were pop music writers, 12 percent were arts editors, 19 percent were entertainment or features writers, 14 percent were staff writers and 4 percent held other titles, such as editorial assistant or classical/jazz critic. 80 percent of respondents were male, and of those whose jobs specifically entailed music criticism, 90 percent were male. Survey participants were asked a series of questions about how they understand the function of their job and what make the attributes of prototypically good rock music.¹⁵⁸



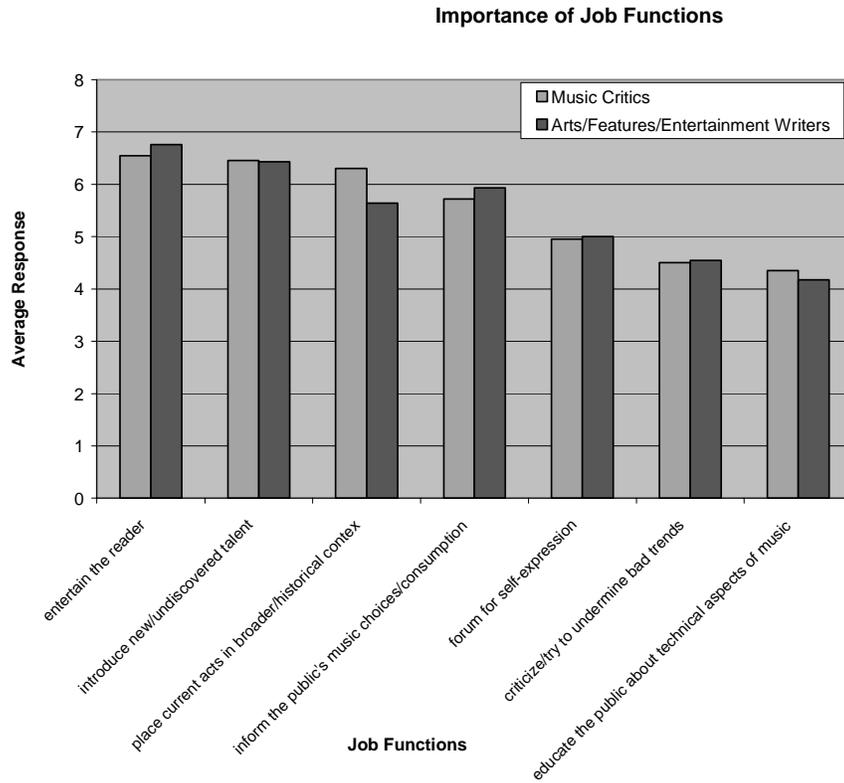
The survey results reveal that authenticity, originality and accessibility remain the most important attributes to music critics. Regardless of particular job title, respondents agreed that “authenticity/sincerity” is most important to good rock music, followed closely by “originality/deviating from norm.” Both of these

Questions were also asked about the respondents’ feelings about Weezer. Those results will be presented in a later chapter.

characteristics were labeled, on average, as being between “important” and “very important” to good rock music. Exactly how authenticity/sincerity is understood by writers may vary – for example some argue that a band merely must *sound* authentic even if it does not *actually* mean what it is saying; but ultimately respondents do seem to have some expectation that music sound as if it is expressing some truth in the Romantic tradition. Originality also seems to be a rather widely held expectation among critics, with 90 percent of writers responding that originality is at least somewhat important to good rock music. For both authenticity and originality, however, music critics’ responses are, on average, less extreme than the average music writer’s.

Music writers’ conceptions of their jobs seem to differ slightly by title. Both music critics and entertainment writers/editors see entertaining the reader as their top responsibility and discovering new talent as a secondary responsibility. However, entertainment writers seem to view their reviews, on average, as being more of a buying guide for the readers. Music critics, on the other hand, place more of an emphasis on placing acts in a historical context – a pattern of response which corroborates the idea that canon creation and the maintenance of genre narratives are central components of music criticism. This difference over the role of contextualizing the music is the most pronounced in the survey with “somewhat unimportant” being the most popular response among entertainment writers and “very important” being the most common response among music critics.

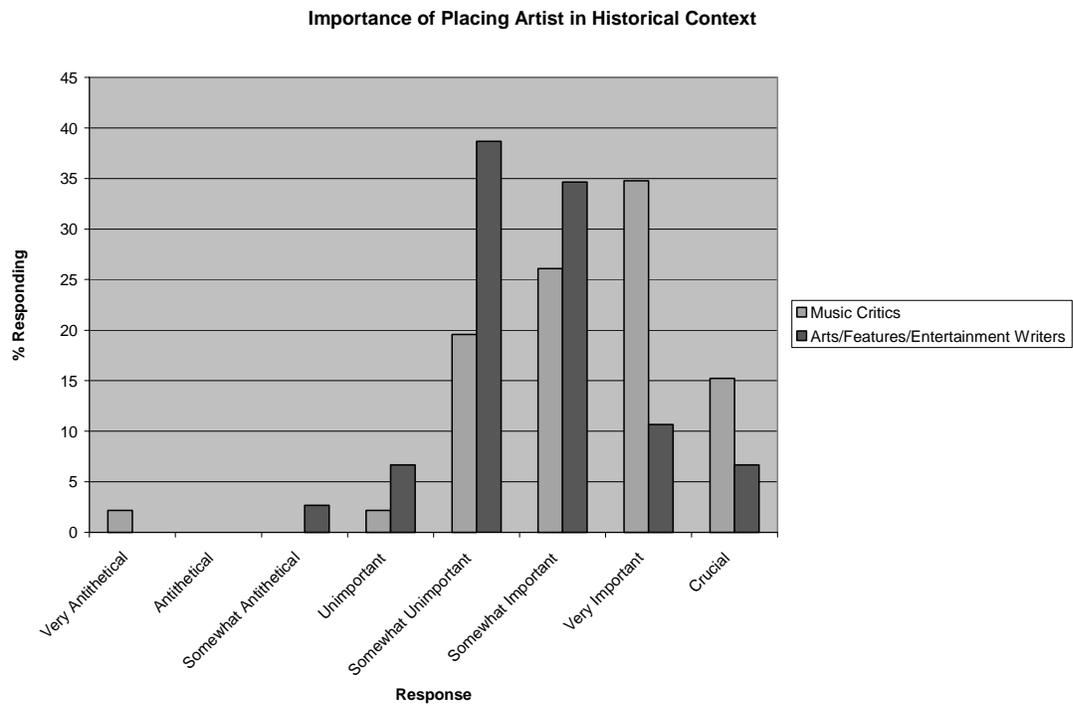
¹⁵⁸ Each potential job function or attribute of rock music was rated on a scale that included “very antithetical,” “antithetical,” “unimportant,” “somewhat unimportant,” “somewhat important,”



Beyond differences in occupation, there are differences in ideology, as well, based upon the type of journal for which an individual writes. Many writers write primarily for one publication, which employs them full-time, and then write freelance for other publications on the side. Two-thirds of survey respondents write for mainstream publications, such as daily newspapers, which aim for a general audience that may be not particularly informed about music. However, these writers often freelance for general interest music publications like *Rolling Stone* which assume that their readers are at least marginally more knowledgeable about music than the average individual. In addition, approximately a third of respondents write for specialty publications that focus on the underground local music scene. These alternative weeklies tend to reflect, to a greater degree, the

“important,” “very important,” and “crucial.”

underground culture outlined in the following section. The main statistical difference in responses between writers who write primarily for alt-weeklies versus mainstream publications is that the former rates discovering new talent as being a more significant part of their job; over two thirds of alternative weekly writer respondents rated this function as being either “very important” or “crucial” to their job in contrast to mainstream writers, of whom less than half responded with such evaluations.



Fragmentation and The Canon

Thus by the mid-1990’s several conflicting ideologies had staked claims within mainstream rock music: the idealist strain of the late 1960’s, the mainstream rock of the 1970’s and 1980’s, and the alternative scene of the 1980’s and early 1990’s. *Rolling Stone* Reviews Editor Nathan Bracket argues that “one of the bigger stories in pop music is that it has become more and more

fragmented.” Indeed, by the late 1970’s, the romantic notion that rock ‘n’ roll was going to change the world according to counter-cultural principles had been largely abandoned. The ostensibly meaningful rock of the 1960’s blossomed commercially throughout the 1970’s as styles within rock further diverged from the aesthetic diversity which the late 1960’s’ grand narrative had, in a sense, papered over. Bracket contends that “in the late 1960’s there was a point where there was a rock music narrative – where all the important artists were being played on FM radio and there was a thread you could follow,” but that over the past thirty years that singular narrative has fragmented.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, as early as the mid-1970’s, hard rock, characterized by a “loud, aggressive guitar” sound; pop/rock, a subgenre which emphasized the importance of melody; progressive/art rock, which evolved partly out of the psychedelic sound of the latter half of the 1960’s, and the “amelodic” and experimental music of the Velvet Underground, MC5 and the Stooges – what later came to be known as “proto-punk” – had all emerged as distinct sounds.¹⁶⁰

This splintering of rock into subgenres, then, led to the construction of a number of taxonomies of music, articulating the various aesthetic codes and histories of subgenres branching out from rock’s phylogenetic tree. This fragmentation then complicated the type of canon construction that lay at the heart of rock criticism. Mark Fenster argues that the establishment of a canon of essential albums represents one of rock criticism’s central accomplishments: “it is hard to imagine the faithful reader of *Spin* and the music pages of the *Village*

¹⁵⁹ Nathan Brackett, telephone interview.

Voice (and similar local alternative weeklies) who has not heard any Velvet Underground or Talking Heads Or the *Rolling Stone* reader who has not heard of REM or U2.”¹⁶¹ Fenster, here, stresses that canons pertain to particular audiences – that the notable artists for a *Village Voice* reader may differ from those for a *Rolling Stone* reader – but that within that particular audience exists widespread recognition of the canon. Brackett concurs that fragmentation of rock has resulted in a series of narratives:

Canon is more specific to different genres. There’s a canon of heavy metal records, and a canon of classic rock records and there’s a canon of punk records If you’re gonna call yourself a serious emo fan, you’re gonna have to listen to bands like Fugazi or the Rites of Spring or the Promise Ring. If you’re a heavy metal fan, you have to listen to Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. If you’re into industrial music, you have to listen to Ministry.¹⁶²

With each canon emphasizing particular traits of the subgenre, the aesthetic code of rock has also been fragmented. As a result, the music press, who write about rock music from a variety of subgenres, must familiarize themselves with each of the applicable canons and be able to understand how an artist places itself within a particular history. Consequently, Brackett argues, “It is important to find out what a band’s influences are or what genre a band places itself it” in order to properly evaluate a record.¹⁶³

While some critics warn about the dangers of using genre-placement to evaluate a band, this has become a central activity within rock criticism. Fenster argues that these canons “serve to guide assessments of works released within the

¹⁶⁰ *All Music Guide*. <http://www.allmusic.com>, and Norman, “Nirvana Credited with Giving New Life to the Rock Scene.”

¹⁶¹ Fenster, “Consumers’ Guides: The Political Economy of the Music Press and the Democracy of Critical Discourse,” 86.

¹⁶² Nathan Brackett, telephone interview.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

genre.”¹⁶⁴ Thus a relatively inaccessible 1980’s underground record would be evaluated using a different vocabulary than a 1970’s arena rock act. The canons then function, says Fenster, “as a familiar trope of criticism, enabling the conclusion that any particular record succeeds or fails because it is like or unlike other, similar records.”¹⁶⁵ In this way, writers for general interest publications are able to evaluate works within their own ostensibly consistent frameworks, i.e., does this album work in the context of what alternative music is supposed to be about. In addition, comparing records to the well-known canon provides the writer with the ability to describe an intangible, non-verbal medium to the reader. As such, comparison constitutes a “necessity” of the craft – a means to overcome the essential difficulty of writing about sound.¹⁶⁶

Not only has the grand narrative of rock fragmented, but real generational differences have emerged within the rock community as well. By the mid-1990s the near-universal acclaim for the popularization of alternative music had dissolved into disagreement among writers about ideals of what rock should be. Though several critics I spoke with argued strongly against establishing a singular set of norms by which to gauge music, several tropes did emerge in the 1990’s about what rock should aim for. Tensions ultimately developed between the mainstream and an alternative rock scene that questioned traditional notions in rock (such as the traditional interpretation of the rock star cult-of-personality) and championed a different canon, composed of underground punk records, than that

¹⁶⁴ Fenster, “Consumers’ Guides: The Political Economy of the Music Press and the Democracy of Critical Discourse,” 86.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Christensen, telephone interview.

accepted by the mainstream. Consequently, a fissure emerged between writers who sympathized with the alternative rock ethos and those who merely found the ideology to be bratty.

Thus by the mid-1990's, a real tension had developed within rock writing between the mainstream and alternative conceptions of rock. With mainstream publications now covering alternative rock on a regular basis, conflicts between the traditions came to the fore. Often along generational lines, writers disagreed with what constituted authenticity in the music, what image artists should aim for, and to what degree "indie cred" mattered. Writers faced an increasingly fractured canon and, as such, understanding how an artist presented himself became important to understanding how the act fit into a particular rock tradition.

CHAPTER 4: PRESS EVALUATIONS OF WEEZER 1994-1997

In this chapter, I briefly recount Weezer's career between 1992 and 1997 and then provide an account of popular evaluations of the band during this period. Using the historical context outlined in the previous chapter, I lay out three tropes popular among writers during the period 1994-1995 to describe Weezer: Weezer as novelty act, Weezer as bubblegum alternative, and Weezer as an ironic alternative/hipster band. While these three labels are not mutually exclusive, they represent ideal types around which representations of Weezer were clustered. Specifically, I evaluate the role of irony/humor, commercial appeal, musical heritage, audience demographics, and various historical contingencies on evaluations of Weezer during this era. I then elaborate on how these visions of Weezer influenced the reception of their second record, *Pinkerton*, in 1996 and readings of Weezer's performances through mid-1997.

Weezer – A Brief History: 1992-1997

Among the bands signed in the early-1990's rush to gobble up the next "alternative star" was Weezer, an alternative rock outfit from Los Angeles. Signed by Geffen, a major label, on June 25, 1993, Weezer was a relative newcomer to the alternative scene, having played the LA club circuit for about a year and a half.¹⁶⁷ Unlike other alternative rock groups of the era, none of Weezer's members – singer/songwriter/guitarist Rivers Cuomo, bassist Matt

Sharp, drummer Pat Wilson, or guitarist Brian Bell – had been part of the 1980’s underground scene. Cuomo had played in a heavy metal band Avant Garde in his native Connecticut before moving to Los Angeles with his group to seek hair metal stardom; Sharp, too, participated in the heavy metal scene of his native Virginia. Despite these metal roots, the Weezer sound was markedly alternative. Having been turned onto college rock while working in a record store in Los Angeles, Cuomo began penning songs fusing the sound of the underground scene, such as the Pixies, and traditional pop/rock, like the Beach Boys.¹⁶⁸

Produced by Ric Ocasek, frontman of the new wave group the Cars, Weezer’s self-titled debut, which came to be known as “the Blue Album” for its cover featuring a lineup of the band against a bright blue background, was released on May 5, 1994.¹⁶⁹ Upon its release, the album garnered little press attention as Weezer embarked on a series of club shows up and down the West Coast. The initial marketing strategy, offers Weezer A&R person Todd Sullivan, was to let the album take hold in the college scene.¹⁷⁰ Coming from the Los Angeles hipster scene, the transition to the college radio market seemed like the natural first step. However, in June of 1994, a commercial alternative radio station in Seattle, KNDD, began playing the first single from the album, “Undone (The Sweater Song),” and noting Weezer’s success in Seattle, the Geffen promotions department began to push the song nationwide.¹⁷¹ Within a few

¹⁶⁷ “Rivers Cuomo.com” <http://www.riverscuomo.com/indexx.htm>.

¹⁶⁸ Rivers Cuomo, quoted in Roger Catlin. “Rivers Cuomo Returns Home With Weezer” *Hartford Courant*. October 6, 1994.

¹⁶⁹ “weezer.com chronology.” http://www.weezer.com/karlscorner/chrono_1994.html.

¹⁷⁰ Todd Sullivan, e-mail correspondence, December 6, 2002.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

weeks, “Undone” had become a staple of alternative radio nationwide. Convinced that “Undone” could be a “smash’ if it had a video,” Geffen set up a video shoot for Weezer, and soon the video was showing in regular rotation on MTV as a “Buzz Clip.”¹⁷² Young alternative music fans showed tremendous enthusiasm for “Undone,” which peaked at number six on the Billboard music chart.

However this commercial success invited a backlash amongst those who pinned Weezer as a novelty act with a jokey song about sweaters. Weezer’s follow-up single, “Buddy Holly,” did little to quell suggestion that Weezer was a novelty act. Although “Buddy Holly”’s success ensured Weezer would not be a one-hit wonder, the catchy two-and-a-half minute pop tune with its pop cultural references to Buddy Holly and Mary Tyler Moore and its ironic use of jive (“What’s with these homies dissing my girl? Why do they gotta front?”) bolstered the claims of those identifying Weezer as a joke act. The video that accompanied the song used computer effects to place Weezer in a *Happy Days* episode, as they seemingly performed for the Fonz and company in Al’s Diner. Both the single and the video were tremendous successes, propelling the Blue Album up the charts, where it peaked in the sixteenth position in late January 1995. While its music streamed into cars and homes nationwide with heavy play on radio and MTV, Weezer toured intensely in support of their record, visiting some cities over four times within the year. After taking opening spots on tours with alternative acts Lush and Live throughout 1994 and touring in Europe in early 1995, Weezer returned Stateside to headline a tour throughout March and early April.

¹⁷² Rivers Cuomo, “Life in the Fast Lane,” *Details*, January 1995.

By this time, however, negative sentiment towards Weezer was peaking among the music press and detractors in the population at large; indicative of this backlash is a *Village Voice* piece run in April 1995 suggesting the United States counter Chinese indifference to CD piracy by “blast[ing] defective Weezer albums – eternally stuck on that irritating ‘sweater’ line – at the Chinese embassy.”¹⁷³ Despite these negative sentiments, Weezer continued to have success on radio and MTV with the release of the third single from their debut album, “Say It Ain’t So.” Indeed, the growing audience led promoters to book Weezer several amphitheatre shows for the summer of 1995. However, slow sales ultimately led these shows to be switched to smaller venues – a move which vindicated those who regarded Weezer as a flavor-of-the-week.¹⁷⁴

In September 1995, Weezer went on hiatus as frontman Rivers Cuomo headed off to attend Harvard University, and bassist Matt Sharp released an album with his band The Rentals. While Sharp scored a radio hit of his own with the new wave-inspired “Friends of P,” Cuomo began writing songs for the next record. Despite Weezer’s having won accolades from some music writers, Cuomo became concerned that Weezer was being written off as a “one-dimensional, silly pop band,” and as such used the winter of 1996 to begin penning a series of more personal lyrics describing failed romantic encounters. The result was an album in the tragic Romantic tradition, depicting Cuomo as Captain Pinkerton, the villain of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* who has an affair

¹⁷³ Thomas Goetz, “To Pirate CD’s is Glorious,” *The Village Voice*, April 5, 1995.

¹⁷⁴ Jim Sullivan, “At Avalon, August Promises to be Red-Hot,” *The Boston Globe*, July 6, 1995.

with a “15-year-old Japanese girl, gets her pregnant and then abandons her.”¹⁷⁵

Recorded in June 1996, the album, featuring noisy guitars and amplifier feedback, was noticeably rougher sounding than their first record, which was marked by clean production and was recorded to a metronome click to ensure rhythmic consistency.

The resulting album, entitled *Pinkerton*, was released on September 24, 1996, amid a flurry television ads sponsored by Geffen. However, unlike *Weezer*, the new record stalled commercially. A series of factors undermined the album’s success on the charts. For one, the first single from the album, “El Scorcho,” failed to achieve significant airplay on many alternative stations, possibly due to its un-radio-friendly sound or to a shift in alternative programming away from “grunge” sounding music. Second, Cuomo refused to do any interviews with the press in the first months following the release, which angered some in the press and limited the number of stories about the album. Third, Pinkerton Security Company filed an injunction against Geffen days before the album’s release which, though ultimately lifted, limited the amount of promotion the record company engaged in during the crucial few days before and after the record’s release. Fourth, Cuomo refused to make the type of clever videos that had propelled the first album up the charts, and the straightforward videos the band did make for the first two singles never caught on. Finally, due to Cuomo’s scholastic obligations, Weezer was able to tour only throughout the fall of 1996 until the end of January 1997, when spring semester commenced. These factors,

¹⁷⁵ Cuomo quoted in Kleinedler & Michael Goldberg. “Weezer Revealed.” *Addicted to Noise*. December 1, 1996.

combined with the relative inaccessibility of *Pinkerton*, resulted in limited commercial success for the album. After debuting at a disappointing nineteenth on the Billboard 200, the album slipped further down the chart each week, falling off the charts completely by February 1997, despite the release of a second single from the record, “The Good Life.”

When Cuomo’s semester ended in May 1997, Weezer resumed touring, opening for ska-rock band No Doubt. Increasingly popular at the time, No Doubt was able to play 7000-person venues in stark comparison to the club shows that Weezer had been playing during the first leg of its tour. The band hoped that the tour and the label’s current release of a third single from *Pinkerton*, “Pink Triangle,” might jumpstart support for the record. However, with *Pinkerton* still languishing at the bottom of the charts and “Pink Triangle” not making a dent on the modern rock chart, Geffen ultimately decided not to invest in a video for the new single.¹⁷⁶ Then, tragically, Weezer fan club founders Mykel and Cari Allan died in a car accident in mid-August while following Weezer from Denver to Salt Lake City during the band’s short tour of the western United States. Devastated by this turn of events, Weezer cancelled a tour date to attend the funeral, and a month later, after having completed a 10-day tour of East Asia, performed a tribute show for the Allan sisters on August 15, 1997. This show would be the last Weezer concert for almost three years as the band again went on hiatus and Sharp left the group to work on *The Rentals* full-time.

Images of Weezer

When Weezer first emerged in 1994-1995, writers had difficulty assessing the band. Weezer's music seemed to represent a number of different traditions. On the one hand, the music maintained the knowing attitude of the alternative scene and utilized the same brand of crunchy, distorted guitar tones as other hallmark alternative bands, like the Pixies and Nirvana. On the other hand, the music had a melodic sensibility particular to pop music, with Beatles-esque chord progressions and catchy melodies. Cuomo had studied Beach Boys records, picking apart the harmonies employed by group, and he employed them throughout Weezer's songs. Further complicating matters was Weezer's alternating use of irony and straightforward sincerity, leaving the listener unsure of what was plaintive and what was comical. As one writer from March of 1995 noted: "Putting a label on Weezer is a daunting task. – they're too cynical to be pop, too peppy to be grunge, too melodic to be metal."¹⁷⁷ Moon argues that "you could ascribe many things to Weezer and try to triangulate them," but that ultimately such efforts to pin the band down as a specific combination of genres "left something missing."¹⁷⁸

Weezer's being at the intersection of so many traditions resulted in pieces tending to use one trait or another to caricature the band in a particular light. Consequently, a series of tropes appeared with which to depict Weezer: Weezer-as-novelty act, Weezer-as-alterna-pop, and Weezer-as-clever-hipsters. The first

¹⁷⁶ "Pink Triangle Saga." <http://www.weezer.com/karlscorner/chrono.asp?NEWSID=6847>.

¹⁷⁷ Means, Sean, "Weezer Blows Fresh Air into Sweaty Fairpark," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 20, 1995.

¹⁷⁸ Moon, telephone interview.

of these characterizations, the novelty act, portrayed Weezer as either a corporate alternative rip-off or a college rock band that aimed to achieve notoriety through a shtick rather than through the works' merit as pop/rock music; this was the most negative of the three characterizations and the one of the most common throughout the first year of Weezer's national exposure. The second characterization, Weezer as lightweight pop, recognized Weezer as a band capable of producing catchy, radio-friendly music but derided it as an act that lacked substance; pieces utilizing this approach to Weezer emphasized the band's fun and upbeat sound and colored the band as a "guilty pleasure."¹⁷⁹ The third general category was Weezer as an alternative/hipster act. This characterization played up the band's use of ironic pop culture allusions, the band's appeal to the college crowd, and the alternative music-style surface of the band's music. These three conceptions, though, were not mutually exclusive. In a single article Weezer might be considered a hipster band ironically employing the retro-pop sensibilities of 1960's, resulting in catchy songs.

Weezer as Novelty Act

Weezer emerged onto the national radar screen at a precarious time: a year when alternative music had become the mainstream. With a flurry of alternative rock acts being signed and with alternative now firmly mainstream, deciding what bands truly represented the underground became a central task; as critic Gina Arnold argued in 1995, "indie credibility" became equated with the "idea that a band is creating a valid artistic statement rather than merely selling a contrived,

¹⁷⁹ Jeff Gordinier, "Sugar Bare Weezer's *Pinkerton* Could Use The Sweet Relief Of Their Debut," *Entertainment Weekly*, September 26, 1996.

commercial musical commodity.”¹⁸⁰ As such, the impressions of a band’s artistic merit, at least among writers who sympathized with the alternative rock notion of authenticity, depended in part upon whether the band was deemed truly alternative or one of the supposedly corporate-copycats flooding the market by 1994.

Emerging as a new alternative band with the class of ‘94 – the era when “tastemakers making decisions on ‘cred’ really came to a head” – Weezer’s indie credibility immediately came into question.¹⁸¹ By August of 1994, Weezer, a band with no traceable roots in the alternative rock community, had achieved, with “Undone (The Sweater Song),” widespread recognition based upon radio and MTV exposure. The single was almost universally pegged as being particularly jokey in character; the song seemed to borrow a hipster’s ironic and detached outlook in humorously comparing a failing relationship to an unraveling sweater. Weezer’s follow-up single, alluding to pop icons Buddy Holly and Mary Tyler Moore, seemingly adopted the same strategy as “Undone.” Both singles succeeded upon the significant radio and MTV support, and both used the humor of college radio bands such as Pavement. As such, Weezer became particularly susceptible to the charge of being a “cookie-cutter corporate-alternative act” that had “adopted the Pavement sound for greater financial rewards.”¹⁸² *Sonic Cool* author Joe Harrington contends that this combination of humor and

¹⁸⁰ Gina Arnold, “Cashing in on Cred,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 22, 1995.

¹⁸¹ Keith Harris, telephone interview with author, January 27, 2003.

¹⁸² Brian McCollum, “*Get Short* Soundtrack Swaggers,” *The Seattle Times*, October 26, 1995, and Michael Mehle, “Underground Passage Pavement Pulls Together On Road To Widespread Pop Acceptance,” *The Rocky Mountain News*, April 23, 1997.

opportunism “is the essence of novelty – it’s just a pose – it’s a mass marketed thing.”

Responses to the critic poll I conducted corroborate this conception of the band as an overplayed and annoying flavor-of-the-week. One critic recalls that in 1994, he found Weezer to be “obnoxious, whiny and not particularly original.” Recounts another respondent: “lots of hype. . . made me wary of their music at first. [I] just considered them a buzz bin band before I sat down and really listened.” Another respondent recollects that despite being “hooked” by Weezer’s debut, he was “suspicious of the band’s meteoric rise while so many of their indie contemporaries and precursors languished.” Another offers that he felt Weezer was particularly “gimmicky” and “put more into their videos than their songs.”

Weezer as “Bubblegrunge”

While some used Weezer’s sense of humor to dismiss the band as a novelty act, a larger portion of the press found Weezer to be, in the words of one survey respondent, a “pleasingly accessible alternative to what had become a deluge of humorless grunge.” Grunge music’s extreme seriousness, which had dominated the alternative rock airwaves for three years, came to head in April 1994 with the suicide of grunge icon Kurt Cobain. *Rolling Stone* writer Anthony DeCurtis recalls that “that kind of moment of alternative triumph turned out to be so brief; no one would ever admit this, but I think it scared people, and it sent a chill up people’s spines.”¹⁸³ In contrast to Nirvana’s dark irony, Weezer presented an ostensibly lighter take on the alternative sound. Whereas the lyrics

¹⁸³ Anthony DeCurtis, telephone interview.

of early 90's grunge seemed weighed down with meaning, Weezer songs were described as "eliciting snickers instead of tears."¹⁸⁴

Pieces describing Weezer in this light accentuated the importance of the pop "hook" to the band's music. In January 1995, *Spin Magazine* proclaimed Weezer to be "unabashedly pop."¹⁸⁵ The songs were described as catchy pop – "hooky" music that one could instantly like. One writer, describing the band in this vein, argued in a 1995 piece: "Weezer really thrives on catchy melodies laid gently over a foundation of loud guitars."¹⁸⁶ One respondent to this study's critic poll argued that Weezer's sound represented "a return to a more pop-oriented, 1980's type style, something very different when compared to other bands in the mid-1990s." Offers another respondent, "Weezer made fun pop-rock for an alternative audience."

While often this characterization took on positive overtones, the flipside of pop's appeal is its reputation for being shallow. This connotation of pop as unserious dates back to rock's split from other forms of popular music; for early rock writers, distinguishing rock from pop was an important task as rock ostensibly spoke for youth while pop was a commercial genre marketed by adults. As such some writers who wrote off Weezer's catchy music as essentially empty music explicated made reference to pop's connection with commercialism. *Spin's* January 1995 piece on Weezer proclaimed "Undone" to have a "monolithically lightweight choral hook" that was "catchy" enough to "invariably end up on some

¹⁸⁴ Stephen Lynch, "Jazz, Hip-Hop Mix Doesn't Gel," *The Orange County Register*, July 22, 1994.

¹⁸⁵ Jac Zinder, "Rock Candy," *Spin*, January 1995.

¹⁸⁶ Dale Ratner, "Sing with the Nerds," *Sun-Sentinel*, February 3, 1995.

K-Tel greatest alternative rock compilation, or become a football cheer, or the first J. Crew ad jingle.”¹⁸⁷ This characterization of Weezer’s music as being one-dimensionally catchy was touted by supporters as well as detractors. One *Entertainment Weekly* piece from 1996 reflected back on Weezer’s first record as “never amount[ing] to more than cotton candy – but just try to stop nibbling.”¹⁸⁸ Although this writer seemingly was a champion of Weezer’s music, the description implies that the album lacks meaning beyond the surface of the music.

Weezer as an Ironic Hipster Band

A great number of articles from this era utilize a trope coloring Weezer as a clever and ironic hipster band. Irony, argues Harrington, “played a major role in the hipster scene, starting with punk and moved through [alternative acts] the Talking Heads and the Smiths,” and indeed one of the most celebrated and vilified aspects of Weezer was its use of irony.¹⁸⁹ With the success “Undone,” Weezer had established the reputation as the essentially jokey band that wrote the “song about sweaters”; a *Seattle Times* piece from October of 1994 pitched Weezer as a “fun band that blessedly doesn’t take itself seriously.”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Weezer’s debut record is sprinkled throughout with sarcasm. For example, the narrator of the album’s second track, “No One Else,” proclaims: “I want a girl who will laugh for no one else/when I’m away she puts her makeup on the shelf/when I’m away she never leaves the house.”¹⁹¹ One piece tagged this lyric, in which Cuomo rebuffs himself for controlling behavior by ironically presenting exaggerated demands

¹⁸⁷ Zinder, “Rock Candy.”

¹⁸⁸ Gordinier, “Sugar Bare Weezer’s ‘Pinkerton’ Could Use The Sweet Relief Of Their Debut.”

¹⁸⁹ Joe Harrington, telephone interview.

¹⁹⁰ Patrick MacDonald, “All the Way Live,” *Seattle Times*, October 28, 1994.

upon his girlfriend, “poignant and wickedly funny.”¹⁹² Similarly, the lyric “Surf Wax America” sarcastically lauds the slacker lifestyle: “you take your car to work/I’ll take my board.”¹⁹³

Beyond its use of humor, Weezer earned the tag as an “ironic” band for its appropriation of various elements of rock iconography, its use of pop cultural references and the “retro” aspects of its sound. Harrington argues that irony had become rampant among the alternative acts with some acts “put[ting] a disclaimer on everything.”¹⁹⁴ Some bands, argues Harrington, approached “almost everything [as] a reference to something in the past” as if to indicate that the band is saying ““we know exactly what we’re doing here.””¹⁹⁵ Charges of this sort were often leveled against Weezer whose music contained references to figures like Buddy Holly, Mary Tyler Moore, KISS guitarist Ace Frehely, KISS drummer Peter Dinklage, and the Beach Boys, among others. One *Newsday* piece from late March 1995 questioned whether Weezer made such allusions as “cynical culture recyclers,” while a *Boston Globe* piece reviewed Weezer’s Buddy Holly video as a “clever postmodern trick - a 1990’s band in a 1970’s show about the 1950’s.”¹⁹⁶ Some critics argued that even Weezer’s sound itself represented an ironic play on

¹⁹¹ Weezer. *Weezer*. Geffen Records, 1994.

¹⁹² Don McLeese, “Reunion of Young, Crazy Horse Bristles with Vitality,” *Austin-American Statesman*, August 11, 1994.

¹⁹³ I think our music on the first record was written to be heard by a smaller, not quite as mainstream audience, kind of a post-modern audience that had been through the whole punk thing and was again willing to accept some more innocent pop-sounding music and be able to listen to it with a sense of irony.

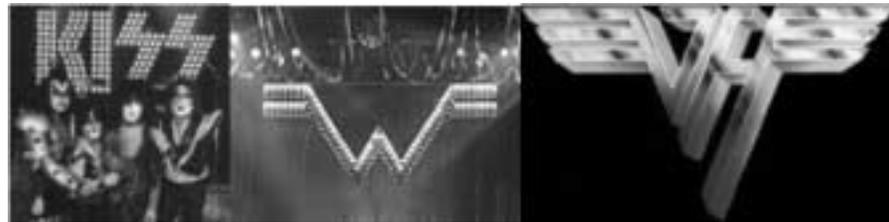
¹⁹⁴ Joe Harrington, telephone interview.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Newsday* “Weezer: Pure Pop for Cool People,” March 30, 1995 and Gilbert, Matthew, “Fonzie Redux,” *Boston Globe*, December 2, 1994.

the pop tradition, with the group's use of Beach Boy-esque harmonies and Beatlesque melodies.

While some writers enjoyed Weezer's use of allusions, a sizable contingent felt the band exuded a hipper-than-thou attitude. A *Dallas Morning News* piece understood the entire Weezer concert experience as spoofing of the traditions of rock music, from the lit-up Weezer logo that alludes to the logo of arena-rockers Van Halen and KISS's bulb-lit stage backdrop, to the Weezer t-shirts that reworked the "old rock slogan 'If it's too loud, you're too old'" as "If it's too loud, turn it down."¹⁹⁷ While some writers portrayed this use of allusion



in a positive light, as Weezer "hav[ing] fun with their own overblown image," other pieces viewed the "jabs" as unfairly "toss[ing] off" the "traditions" of rock "left and right."¹⁹⁸ With Weezer emerging after three years of the alternative community's assault on rock stardom and the rise of a "new generation of rock stars trying its best not to be rock stars," one could not quite be sure how to take Weezer's references to arena rock.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, some interpreted these sorts of references to be integral to the character of the band; argued one critic: "A Kiss-style lighted 'W' that resembled the World Wrestling Federation symbol seemed

¹⁹⁷ Tom Maurstad, "Oooh-Wee-Oooh," *Dallas Morning News*, April 6, 1995.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. and Pat Riley, "Over the Weekend," *Buffalo News*, July 31, 1995.

¹⁹⁹ Kot, "Outside in Dazed and Confused, The Fringe Becomes the Mainstream."

awfully extravagant and wasteful just for an ironic joke. But so does a career as an ironic joke band.”²⁰⁰

By 1995, many mainstream critics, particularly those who had come of age before the rise of the underground scene, found the irony of alternative rock distasteful – an affront to authenticity. Thus, while the college rock scene took music produced in its anti-establishment, uncommercial world as authentic, champions of the first counter-cultural revolution celebrated a separate notion of authenticity – one that idealized the sorts of acts that some alternative artists lampooned. Harrington argues that ironic acts “like the Pixies . . . cheapen[ed] the whole approach” by “not having the balls to stand for anything” and by portraying “sincerity as a bad thing.”²⁰¹ Harrington argued that among the alternative set, authenticity, which “means you’re not in on the joke,” remains incongruous with an ironic approach to music.²⁰² DeCurtis concurs that, “for want of a better term, if for the sake of argument, one posits irony as opposed to authenticity, it’s precisely that aspect of Weezer” that turned off a number of critics.²⁰³

Weezer and the Press 1996-1997

For the most part, then, Weezer was written about as a fundamentally unserious band. While some critics raved about the band’s use of catchy melodies and guitar hooks and admired the band’s pop cultural references as clever, the

²⁰⁰ Kevin John Bozelka, “Star Appeal In Ska? No Doubt,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 3, 1997.

²⁰¹ Joe Harrington, telephone interview.

²⁰² Ibid.

band was understood as a footnote in the history of rock – a nice pop/rock band adopting an endearingly geeky persona but not a rock outfit that could ever be regarded as *important* in the sense that the canonical artists are. Positive pieces outnumbered the number of negative pieces during this era, but the negative pieces tended to be particularly vicious with puritanical elements of the alternative scene regarding Weezer as a pretender and mainstream critics expressing a distaste for the alternative movement's irony.

An awareness of Weezer's reception as an ironic frivolous pop act informed Cuomo's efforts in penning the band's follow-up. Concerned that Weezer had come to be interpreted as an unserious pop act, Cuomo "learned to be careful" about what "image" to present to the public and as a result produced what he termed "an album without irony."²⁰⁴ Released in the fall of 1996, *Pinkerton* did indeed make headway in steering the press away from using a "lightweight" tag to describe the band. In the year following the album's release a new trope emerged. Informed by the particular sound and lyrical content of *Pinkerton*, this trope portrayed the band in a more serious light, and for the first time, more than a handful of pieces regarded Weezer as more than an enjoyable pop oddity. These pieces emphasized the introspective nature of the lyrics and the attention paid to detail throughout the album.

The pieces portraying *Pinkerton* as an artistic step forward highlighted the frivolity assigned to Weezer following its first release. For example, the *Austin-American Statesman* noted that with *Pinkerton*, Weezer transformed "themselves

²⁰³ DeCurtis, telephone interview.

²⁰⁴ Yves Bongarçon, "Et Au Milieu , Cool, Un Rivers," *Rock'n'Roll Sound*, November 1996.

from a smarty-pants, goofy, tongue-in-cheek band to one of the most wildly-orchestrated, catchy and original groups banging away today.”²⁰⁵ Such a juxtaposition clearly outlines the distinction between the image of the band as clever jokesters and that of the band as capable musicians producing an original sound. Tagging the album “undeniable,” the piece praised Cuomo’s “self-absorbed, sensational love songs” as injecting stories of the “ultimate sexual swinger” with an endearing “sweet[ness].”²⁰⁶ Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times*’ review recognized *Pinkerton* as an irony-free effort – a “seemingly genuine, desperate search for sex and love.” The *Spokesman Review* also provided Weezer a ringing endorsement in May 1997, describing “*Pinkerton*” as a “pop masterpiece . . . brimming with brilliant . . . both lyrically and musically.”²⁰⁷

However, lingering tropes utilized in describing the band’s previous release continued to be employed to evaluate the band’s new work. For example a *Newsday* review proclaimed *Pinkerton* to be “one of the most surprisingly likeable releases of the year” due to its “more tart and focused point of view.”²⁰⁸ However, while the piece applauds *Pinkerton*’s lack of sugar-coating, the writer contends that the group’s “misquoted Beatles” melodies and “overenunciat[e] vocals. . . make clear the group’s original intention to be” its generation’s Cheap Trick, an “aggressively marketed, hard-touring, self-caricaturing” late 70’s rock

²⁰⁵ Chris Riemenschneider, “Weezer’s *Pinkerton* a Joy to Hear,” *Austin American Statesman*. October 1, 1996.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Joe Ehrbar, “No – Some – Doubt,” *The Spokesman Review*, May 22, 1997.

²⁰⁸ *Newsday*. “Weezer – *Pinkerton*.” September 17, 1996.

group.²⁰⁹ As such, some writers continued to perceive Weezer as an essentially ironic and whimsical act.

While a handful of positive pieces written about Weezer during this era emphasize *Pinkerton* as an artistic step forwards, most pieces built upon the notion of Weezer as a fun pop act, arguing either that *Pinkerton* proved to be another batch of catchy tunes or that the album failed to recreate the clean upbeat sound of *The Blue Album*. As such, despite the band's intention of creating a darker record, reviewers continued to evaluate Weezer through the framework of thoughtless alternative pop. For example, the *Toronto Star* argued that while on *Pinkerton* "Weezer resists the easy hooks and harmonies of its runaway 1994 single 'Buddy Holly,'" the album is ultimately redeeming due to the "pop still fight[ing] its way" through heavily distorted guitar arrangement.²¹⁰ Similarly *People* endorsed *Pinkerton* as an album whose "lyrics make an Archie comic seem downright deep by comparison"; concludes *People*: "Pinkerton is a hoot, crammed with catchy, pop-punk melodies and defiantly incorrect song subjects."²¹¹ The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, as well, lauded the record for containing the "same catchy hooks and lyrics that rocketed the band to pop darling status last year." One writer naming *Pinkerton* the third best release of 1996 dubbed the album: "a belter, brimming with big, dumb, impossibly catchy pop tunes."²¹²

²⁰⁹ Ibid. and "Cheap Trick." *Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock*. Ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski. New York: Rolling Stone Press., 2001. p. 167.

²¹⁰ Peter Howell, "Weezer – *Pinkerton*," *Toronto Star*, October 5, 1996.

²¹¹ Craig Tomashoff, "Song," *People Magazine*, October 21, 1996.

²¹² Noula Tsavdaridis, "Top Spins' Six," *Daily Telegraph*, December 26, 1996.

A handful of writers, using the same radio-pop rubric, dismissed *Pinkerton* because the album's messy-sounding mix of distorted guitars and wandering bass lines failed to capture the same pop feel of the debut. For example *Entertainment Weekly* gave *Pinkerton* a mixed review, arguing that while the album would please "indie purists" with its "sloppy and raw" sound, the record "will disappoint anyone who prefers a candy coating on the bubblegum."²¹³ Along similar lines, *The Record* lamented that "the melodies [on *Pinkerton*] have fallen prey to too great an onslaught of grungy guitars and bludgeoning power chords," undermining the "smart mixture of singable melodies and distinctive guitar squall that marked Weezer's debut album."²¹⁴

Despite a majority of reviews of *Pinkerton* and its corresponding tours taking a positive tone, there does seem to have been a contingent of writers who detested the record. The *Dayton Daily News*' account falls within this category; the piece tagged Weezer a "one-hit wonder" and declared that *Pinkerton*'s "loud, grating songs . . . fail[ed] miserably" and doomed Weezer to "the graveyard of forgettable bands."²¹⁵ Similarly, in January 1997, *Rolling Stone* released its yearend poll naming *Pinkerton* the second worst album of the year. Interestingly, the reason for this judgment remains unclear; of the 40 percent of respondents to *Rolling Stone*'s end of 1996 poll I contacted, none recall voting *Pinkerton* among the worst albums of the year, and in fact, several expressed positive evaluations of the record. None of the respondents published negative reviews of *Pinkerton*, indicating that perhaps the critics who continued to write about Weezer were only

²¹³ Gordinier, "Sugar Bare Weezer's 'Pinkerton' Could Use The Sweet Relief Of Their Debut."

²¹⁴ Steven Johnson, "The Feel and Spirit of Rock Classics," *The Record*, November 17, 1996.

those who felt the band worthy of discussion. A number of critics did, in fact, write off Weezer, refusing to provide the group any ink in the pages of their publications at all. One critic responded to this study's critic poll explaining that he was not familiar with *Pinkerton* because "Buddy Holly"'s "cute[ness] basically handed [him] all the reason [he] needed to never take them seriously." Another survey respondent questioned my choice of Weezer as a case study citing them as an "uninteresting" band not worth discussing.

Conclusion

By the time Weezer went on hiatus in mid-1997, the most common interpretation held that Weezer represented a band particularly talented at writing catchy radio songs for alternative music fans. Whether individuals felt that *Pinkerton* lived up to the Weezer's debut record, many in the music press felt that "Buddy Holly" exhibited a sharp pop sensibility unmatched in the alternative rock community. Such an assessment, while positive, proved consistent with the type of judgment made of a successful middlebrow work in Bourdieu's field of large-scale production. Weezer, then, came to represent the serial novelist who succeeds at his or her craft by penning a bestseller; though Weezer's work proved a technical achievement combining humor and catchy hooks into edgy pop/rock hits, few critics felt that Weezer's albums represented some greater artistic accomplishment.

Pinkerton's disappointing commercial performance seemingly vindicated writers who had depicted Weezer as a "one-hit wonder." Weezer became an

²¹⁵ Ray Marcano, "Recordings in Brief." *Dayton Daily News*. October 11, 1996.

often-cited example of the volatility of the 1990's music industry – a pop band that could rule the charts in one year and be forgotten the next. In a Grammy Awards preview piece run in hundreds of papers across the country, the *Associated Press* grouped Weezer with other “one-hit wonders” that the piece described as “either being consigned to oblivion or racing toward it.”²¹⁶

Throughout the latter half of the 1990's a number of bands deemed flavors-of-the-week were compared to Weezer, which had seemed to have finally burned out in 1997. Within portions of the music press, Weezer became synonymous with the concept of a disposable novelty act.

Even among those who trumpeted Weezer as a budding talent, few considered Weezer's records to be of the same ilk as those that had already been inscribed into the alternative rock canon. While several critics gushed about Weezer's “strong songwriting,” few held the band to be “important,” a term used to describe canonical records or acts – artists or works that constituted a unique achievement or proved to be particularly influential. However, as will be explored in the next chapter, by 1997 a number of individuals outside the music press had begun to champion Weezer as an important and meaningful act.

²¹⁶ *Associated Press*. “Music Industry Frets over Stars with Staying Power.” February 18, 1997.

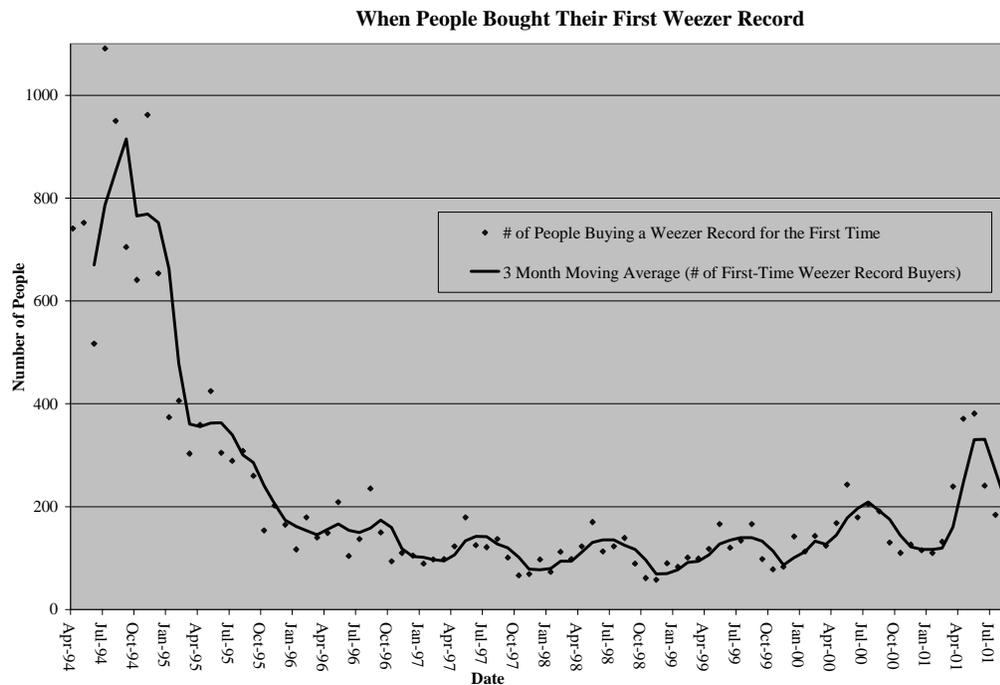
CHAPTER 5: WEEZER'S POPULAR FRONT

In this chapter I argue that Weezer's fan base has proved highly mobilized, actively seeking new members and forwarding a notion of the band as "important." I begin by outlining the teenage social networks that developed and championed Weezer to their acquaintances. With this background, I then examine particularly vocal sections of the fan base: an internet-based community of Weezer fans, a cohort of young musicians championing Weezer, and the emo subculture that adopted Weezer as an icon. To develop these arguments, I point to evidence arising from a survey of 20,000 Weezer fans on the Weezer Mailing List, from archives of internet discussion forums, and from newspaper accounts of Weezer's fan base.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ The Weezer Mailing List is made up of individuals who, since mid-2000, have given Weezer their e-mail addresses in order to receive e-mail updates about the band. In addition to the 120,000 individuals on this e-mail list, approximately 2000 more individuals who had posted their e-mail addresses in various Weezer online forums in the mid-1990's were sent the survey. The e-mail sent to these individuals contained information about purposes of the study – to study "attitudes towards Weezer" – and listed prizes available to those who completed the survey. To take the survey, the individual would visit a website where the survey was posted. The survey consisted of thirty-six questions, though most questions consisted of multiple parts. The survey was two pages, with each page being submitted separately; an individual's two pages were later matched up using his or her e-mail address, which was a required input on both pages. Responses were collected between November 22nd through November 25th and between December 2nd and December 5th. An individual's responses were submitted directly into a Microsoft Access database upon completion of the survey. Once the survey was completed, multiple entries – defined as an e-mail address appearing more than once – were deleted from the database; redundant IP addresses were also examined, but very few multiple entries were discovered. The survey data may not be completely representative of the Weezer fan base as a whole; while most of the data would seem to hold up among a large cross-section of the Weezer fan base, the impact of online communications is probably overrepresented. Another concern with the data is that the sample is self-selecting; as such only people who wanted to take the survey filled it out. However, the survey's results are indeed interesting if the population in question is delimited to current Weezer fans who have incorporated the internet into their fandom in some way (defined here as signing up for the Weezer Mailing List). It does not take a very web savvy fan to sign up for the Weezer Mailing List, and given the average internet use of the respondents, it should not be suspected that these respondents are outliers in a young, plugged-in fan base like Weezer's.

Weezer's Mobilized and Growing Fan Base

Despite having released a commercially disappointing record and being essentially dormant between 1997 and 2000, Weezer was able to expand their fan base throughout the closing years of the 1990's. Without record company support or concerts or new albums to attract fans, support for Weezer continued to grow throughout Weezer's hiatus. Indeed, when Weezer began to play shows again in the summer of 2000, each performance sold out in "record times"; when asked about a late 2000 Dallas show selling out in four minutes, Cuomo responded: "common wisdom is that once you go away for a little while, everyone completely forgets who you are, and they've moved on to the next trend, but I guess we've been really lucky because it seems like we're more popular than ever."²¹⁸

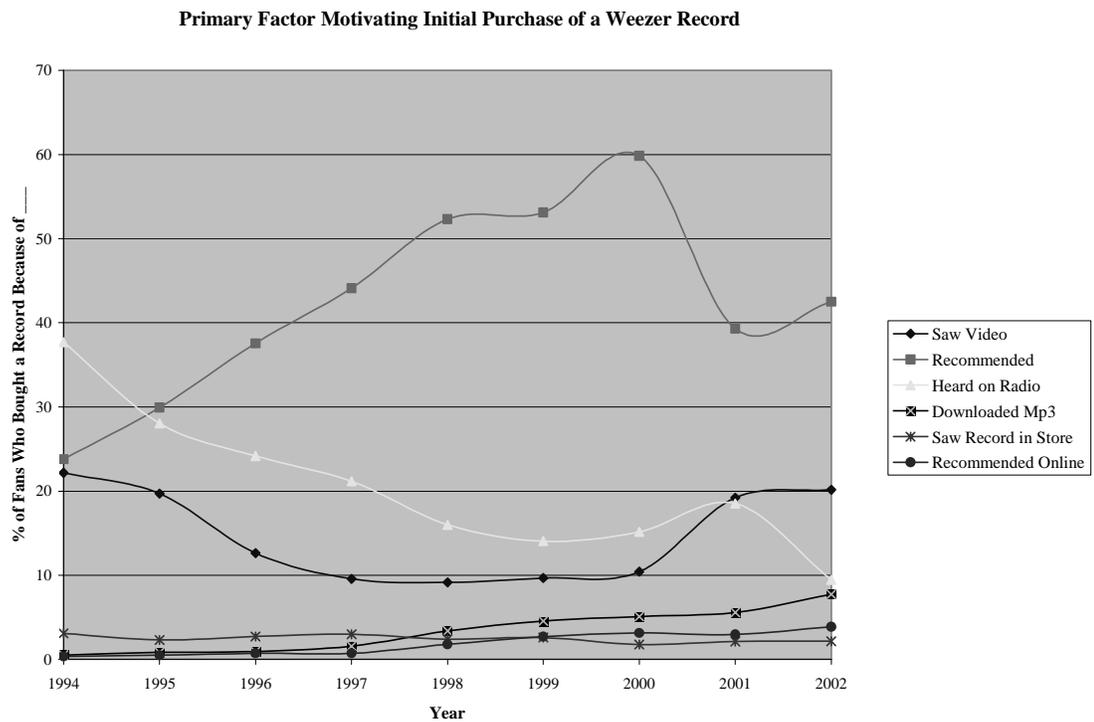


²¹⁸ Rivers Cuomo on *The Adventure Club with Josh*, KDGE Radio, September 12, 2000.

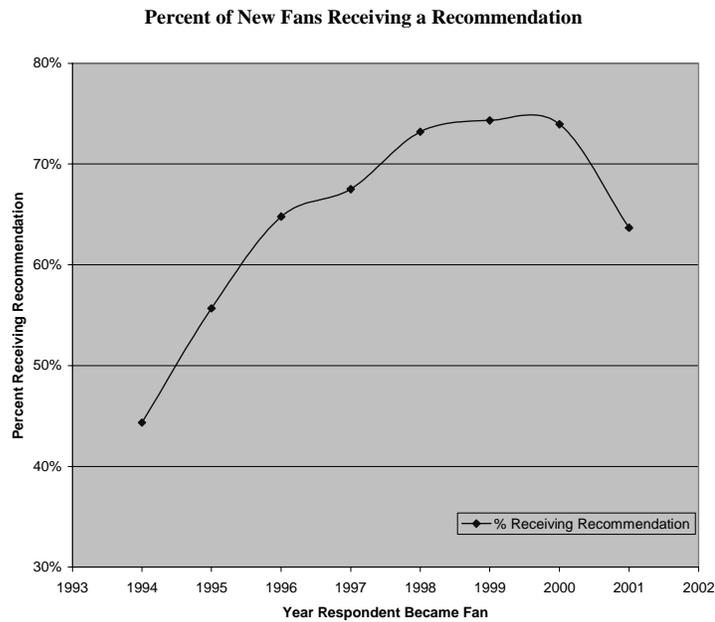
My survey data, revealing the steady addition of new fans each month, corroborates this observation of a growing fan base. The survey responses show that a preponderance of respondents bought their first Weezer record during the “Blue Album” era in 1994-1995. Throughout 1995, there was a steep decline in the number of new fans (measured as fans who bought their first Weezer album), and there was a small jump in 1996 and early 1997 with the release of *Pinkerton*. The number of new fans rose slightly in the summer of 1997 and fell again in the fall. Rather than continuing to decline, the number of new fans remained approximately steady throughout 1998 (with monthly variance) and began to climb in 1999. The number of new fans peaked again in 2000 when Weezer began to tour again, fell off slightly during the winter and jumped again to its highest point since 1995 with the release of the Weezer’s second self-titled record, also known as “The Green Album,” in May 2001.

This oddly expanding fan base begs the question as to what particular aspects of Weezer fandom lent themselves to maintaining the band’s popularity at a time when the group was essentially broken up. The survey data indicates that the growth in the Weezer fan base can be attributed to word-of-mouth/social networks, as the relative importance of recommendations in creating new Weezer fans skyrockets during this period. Whereas Weezer’s initial popularity may have been due to institutional support – airtime on radio and MTV, prominent store displays due to record company support, and record company sponsored tours –, over time, the ways in which Weezer fans were incorporated into the fan base changed. By 1997, over 40 percent of new fans had become fans primarily as a

consequence of an acquaintance's recommendation, and throughout the hiatus this number exceeds 50 percent. Setting aside whether a recommendation was the deciding factor in buying a new Weezer record, of those who became fans during the hiatus, 74 percent responded that someone had recommended the band to them.



This pattern of recommendation is corroborated by the large number of Weezer fans who claim to have recommended the band to others. Of those who became fans before 2000, 93 percent have recommended Weezer to at least one other person who came to like the band, and 48 percent said they have recommended Weezer to at least 9 other people who then became fans themselves. Beyond this proselytizing on behalf of the band, 76 percent of survey

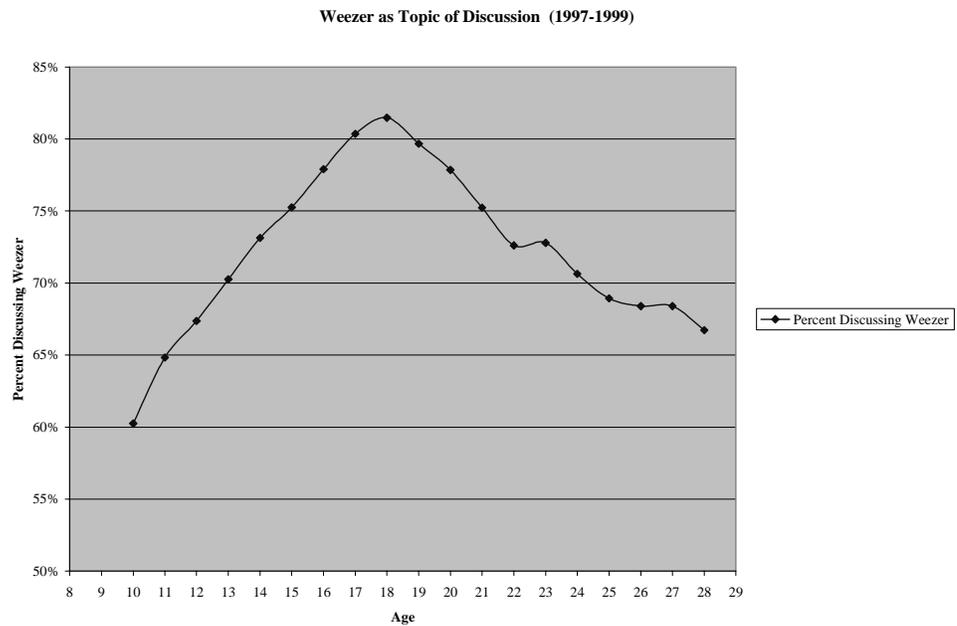


respondents say they talked about Weezer with their friends during the hiatus. A breakdown of the ages of those who talked about Weezer with their friends during the hiatus shows that high school and college students were particularly likely to have discussed with Weezer with others; from 1997-1999, on average 82 percent of individuals who, at the time, were eighteen talked about the band with others. As such, Weezer’s word-of-mouth network appears to have been rooted in the high school and college communities during this era.

Newspaper articles of this era indicate the degree to which Weezer became an important part of young people’s culture. For example, Weezer appears as a favorite band in the profiles many papers ran on young people in the community. Within the sample of articles I evaluated, Weezer had appeared in 25 such profiles by the time the band reemerged in 2000. Along similar lines, writers and individuals profiled in pieces often referenced Weezer as intrinsically tied to youth. For example, one individual in his efforts develop a community newsletter

told the local newspaper that his “goal for the newsletter [was] ‘to grow to the point where every kid thinks that compound interest is as cool as Weezer.’”²¹⁹

Similarly, one parent interviewed for a *The Spokesman Review* piece on Christmas gifts commented: “They’re teenagers; they want Weezer CDs.”²²⁰



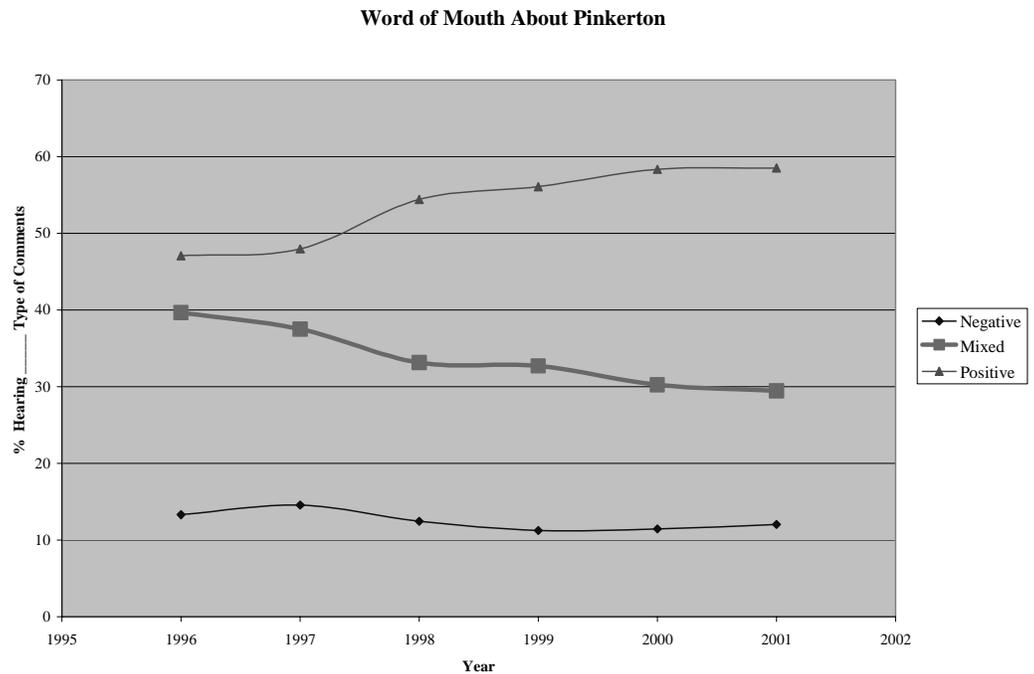
Emergence of an Alternate Pinkerton Evaluation

In addition to recruiting new fans, Weezer’s vocal fans served to normalize opinion about *Pinkerton*, which had elicited mixed reactions within the Weezer fan base. The fan survey shows the aggregate reputation of the album to have changed after 1996. Survey participants were asked what tone of word of mouth they had received about *Pinkerton* in the year they first heard album. Their responses show that during the hiatus individuals increasingly heard fairly or very positive comments about the album. Corresponding to the increase in positive

²¹⁹ Kimberly Sanchez, “Financial Advice for New Grads,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 11, 1995.

²²⁰ Jim Kershner, “Flexible Flyer,” *The Spokesman Review*, December 7, 1996.

opinion is a 25 percent decrease in the amount of “mixed” opinion individuals report. Negative appraisals declined over this time period as well, peaking in 1997 and declining slightly over time. As such, the overall disposition towards *Pinkerton* seems to have changed significantly during the hiatus.



The survey responses painted a far different version of *Pinkerton* than that adopted by most of the press. The trope which emerged within the Weezer fan base read *Pinkerton* as essentially authentic. Stressing the autobiographical nature of the album, fans ascribing to this view of the record noted an honesty about the record and a sensitivity to the pain associated with romantic relationships. For example, one survey respondent described *Pinkerton* as “vulnerable and beautiful,” featuring vocals marked by “such emotion and hurt” that the listener “could just feel the pain and hurt behind it.” Similarly another respondent who lauded *Pinkerton* as a “classic album . . . like Nirvana’s

Nevermind,” argued the album to be different from most records because “you don’t see musicians writing about the real things they are going through and being honest about it.” In total over 800 survey respondents used “genuine,” “authentic,” or “honest” in describing the album.

Champions of *Pinkerton* within the fan base also regarded the album as particularly salient to their own lives. These individuals regarded Cuomo as speaking not only for his own experiences but in response to universal sentiments felt by any individual coming of age. This judgment of the record showed broad support in the survey with over 1400 respondents specifically stating that they “related” to the album. For example, one respondent declared that “the songs were all so personal and yet so universal; I really felt like I could relate to all of them.” Another declared that *Pinkerton* was a “very personal album, one that I could relate to (as I’m sure most other high school kids could).”

The data from the survey reveals that these impressions of *Pinkerton* spread throughout the fan base during the hiatus and led fans to more favorably evaluating the album.²²¹ The average fan’s current evaluation of *Pinkerton* was almost 1 point higher (on a 1 to 10 scale) at the time of the survey than when he or she originally heard the album; among those who felt differently in 2002 than when they first heard the record, the margin between first and current impression was over 2.5 points. In order to further explore the reasons for the change of opinion, a random sample was taken of respondents who said their evaluations of

²²¹ For the section examining the reasons for people’s changes of heart about *Pinkerton*, a sample of 560 responses were randomly selected from the pool of responses for which a change of opinion was registered. These 560 responses were then coded as either exhibiting or not exhibiting a variety of reasons for having an opinion of *Pinkerton* that changed over time.

the record changed since they initially heard it. Of those selected, I then logged the most popular answers to the free form question: “If your opinion of *Pinkerton* is different than your original evaluation, why did your opinion change?”

There appears to be a significant relationship between age and impressions of *Pinkerton* at work in this data with younger fans claiming not to have been able to appreciate the album when they first heard it. Indeed, at the time *Pinkerton* was released, Weezer’s fan base was indeed quite young. Concert reviews from 1994-1997 routinely comment upon the young age of the fans. As an alternative band aimed at the college crowd, one might expect Weezer would have drawn a younger crowd; however, Weezer’s crowds were *particularly* young with attendees as young as 10 years old. Observed a *Washington Post* writer: “The Weezer concert could have been a scene at a Chuck E. Cheese, what with all those kiddies in attendance.”²²² Bassist Matt Sharp concurred, joking in a 1995 interview that Weezer’s “demographic basically breaks down to 12-year-old kids freaking out on Snickers bars.”²²³ The survey corroborated these anecdotal accounts; survey responses show that the mean age of a fan in 1996 was only 15 years old.

The three factors that had the greatest impact on the changes in an individual’s opinion of *Pinkerton* were those most often associated with hearing the record at a young age: “too young at first listen,” “grew up,” “ultimately related to lyrics,” “taste in music changed,” and “picked it up again and liked it.” The first three of these factors may relate to the adult-themes of the record. With

²²² Means, “Weezer Blows Fresh Air into Sweaty Fair Park,” and John Maynard, “Weezer,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1995.

Pinkerton aiming to relate Cuomo’s own experiences – the “shadier portion of [his] masculine side” – young fans record having had difficulty relating to songs about failed romance and about coping with conflicted sexual feelings.²²⁴ For example, one respondent wrote: “I was 12 or 13 at the time, I don’t think you can truly appreciate that album that young,” and another stated: “[I] progressed further into adolescence - frustrated by girls, darker outlook on life.”

WHY DID YOUR OPINION OF PINKERTON CHANGE?

RESPONSES	Change of Rating	Percent Listing Response	Age at First Pinkerton Listening	Years to Arrive at Current Opinion
<i>Too Young At First Listen</i>	3.89	5.14	14.10	2.55
<i>Picked It Up Again and Liked It</i>	3.77	3.90	16.23	2.20
<i>Taste in Music Changed</i>	3.24	7.45	15.87	1.85
<i>Grew Up/Matured</i>	3.21	5.85	16.06	2.15
<i>Grew Accustomed to Novel Sound</i>	3.11	7.62	18.40	0.55
<i>Friends/Word of Mouth Prompted Reevaluation</i>	2.93	4.96	16.22	1.39
<i>Ultimately Related to Lyrics</i>	2.93	11.52	15.80	1.15
<i>Learned to Like Pinkerton On Its Own Terms</i>	2.91	6.03	17.58	0.86
<i>Became a Bigger Weezer Fan</i>	2.80	5.32	15.32	1.83
<i>Listened More or Closer</i>	2.57	35.99	16.37	0.66
<i>“Just Grew on Me”</i>	2.46	32.98	16.57	0.68
<i>Ultimately Appreciated Pinkerton’s Emotion/Authenticity</i>	2.20	6.56	16.53	0.96
<i>Deciphered Lyrics</i>	2.20	13.48	16.53	0.96

These “youth factors” are statistically correlated; someone saying he was too young at first listen was more likely to have said the record was too dark, that he eventually had experiences that allowed him to relate to the record, and that his taste in music as a whole eventually changed. For a record whose appeal, according to responses, is largely lyrical, having an audience too young to appreciate the lyrical content had a detrimental impact on how the record was

²²³ Steve Appleford, “As Funny as They Wanna Be,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1995

initially received. Given this age effect and the average young age at which one first heard Pinkerton, then, one would expect a certain lag between when one first heard the record, and when one came to appreciate it.

Many respondents also commented that the record was not immediate – that it took a while for the record to grow on them. These fans argued that it was necessary for them to listen to the record more times or with greater attention in order to appreciate it. Individuals who said they had to grow accustomed to the raucous sound of the record or had to learn to appreciate *Pinkerton* on its own terms as opposed to comparing it to the cleaner-sounding other Weezer records tended to be the oldest at the time they first heard the record. This inaccessibility also, no doubt, fueled the album’s cult status as listeners who only heard the album in passing were unlikely to appreciate it whereas those who had taken the time to learn to like *Pinkerton* had an incentive to then become a booster for the album.

Three Vocal Fan Networks

Three particular sub-communities within the Weezer fan base were particularly vocal in their promotion of Weezer: the burgeoning online Weezer community, a cohort of young musicians, and individuals partaking in the “emo” movement of the late 90’s. As will be outlined below, each of these three communities forwarded claims of Weezer’s artistic merit, which ultimately expanded and energized Weezer’s fan base. These groups proved particularly

²²⁴ Quoted from Pinkerton Press Release in Tom Phalen, “Weezer: Mysterious, Revealing.” *Seattle Times*, October 31, 1996.

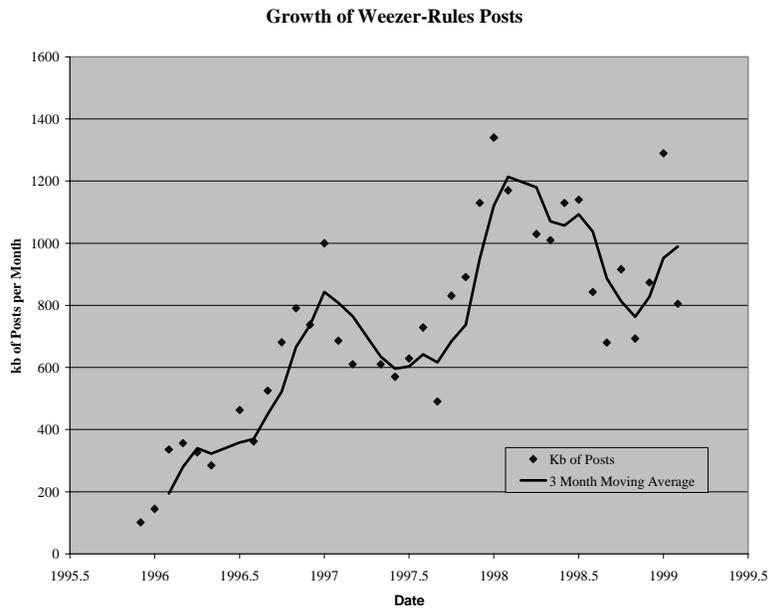
successful in spreading a conception of *Pinkerton* (and, for some, *Weezer* as well) as a canonical album capturing the zeitgeist of their generation.

Weezer Online Community

During the hiatus, electronic discussion forums about Weezer played a growing importance within the Weezer fan base. These forums built upon an initial strong presence by Weezer fans on the net. In 1995, Weezer fans developed their first online discussion list, “Weezer-Rules.” As a forum for Weezer fans to contact one another, register their opinions on a variety of Weezer-related topics, and respond to others’ comments, the list grew in popularity throughout 1996. This nascent online activity was promoted by Weezer fan club founders Mykel and Carli Allan, who answered fans’ questions on Weezer-Rules, visited Weezer chat rooms, and corresponded with fans via e-mail. By 1996, the Weezer fan base was so net-savvy that Weezer’s 1996 *Pinkerton* shows were the 5th most accessed concerts on Ticketmaster’s website, Ticketmaster.com, surpassing a number of popular acts playing arenas that dwarfed the clubs in which Weezer performed.²²⁵

Rather than dissipate when Weezer went on hiatus, these internet communities expanded. The internet message boards became an important forum for fans to exchange opinions on Weezer and to seek out whatever updates they could muster about prospective Weezer activity. As Weezer- Rules expanded throughout 1996, an online message board called alt.music.weezer developed as part of the Usenet system that hosted discussion forums on a variety of topics. Both forums exhibited an

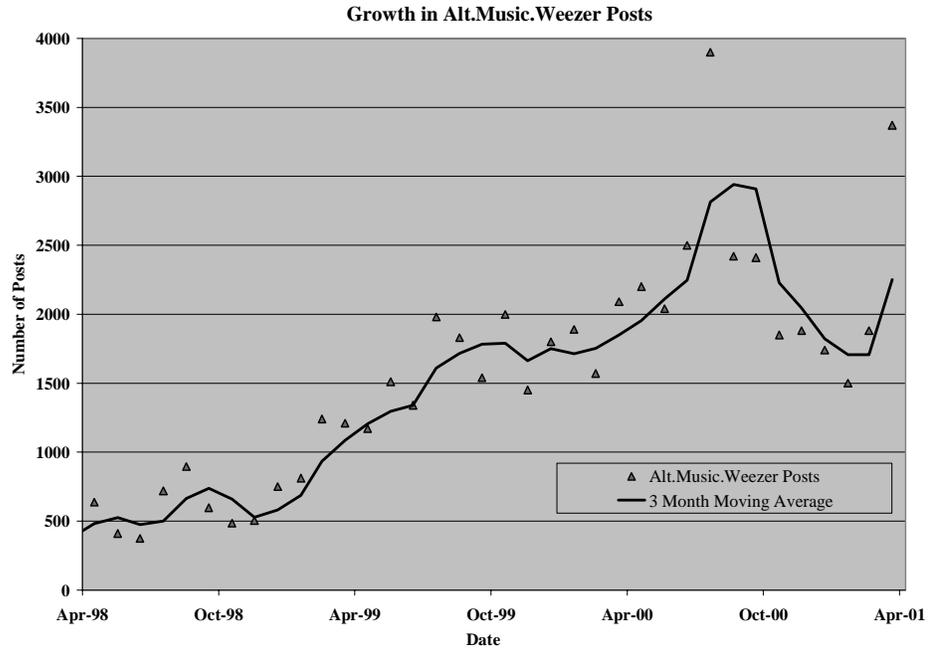
²²⁵ *Business Wire*. “Ticketmaster Top 25’ Chart,” October 25, 1996.



explosion of activity with Weezer-Rules activity doubling between mid-1997 and mid-1998 and alt.music.weezer posting increasing fourfold in 1999. One individual who read both of these lists during this period contends that very few individuals posted on both lists and that fewer than 10 percent of the individuals on Weezer-Rules also read alt.music.weezer. These patterns suggest that the growth of these boards was dramatic indeed.

Discussions within these groups reified the fans' conception of *Pinkerton* as an exceptionally personal and emotional record. Michael Janiga, an alt.music.weezer user from 1997 until 2001, argues that the “idea that the album was emotionally honest came as a response to people not liking the record.”²²⁶ Initial disagreement about *Pinkerton* promoted debate in online forums about the merits of the new record, and proponents of *Pinkerton* proved particularly vocal

²²⁶ Michael Janiga, Internet Interview March 15, 2003.



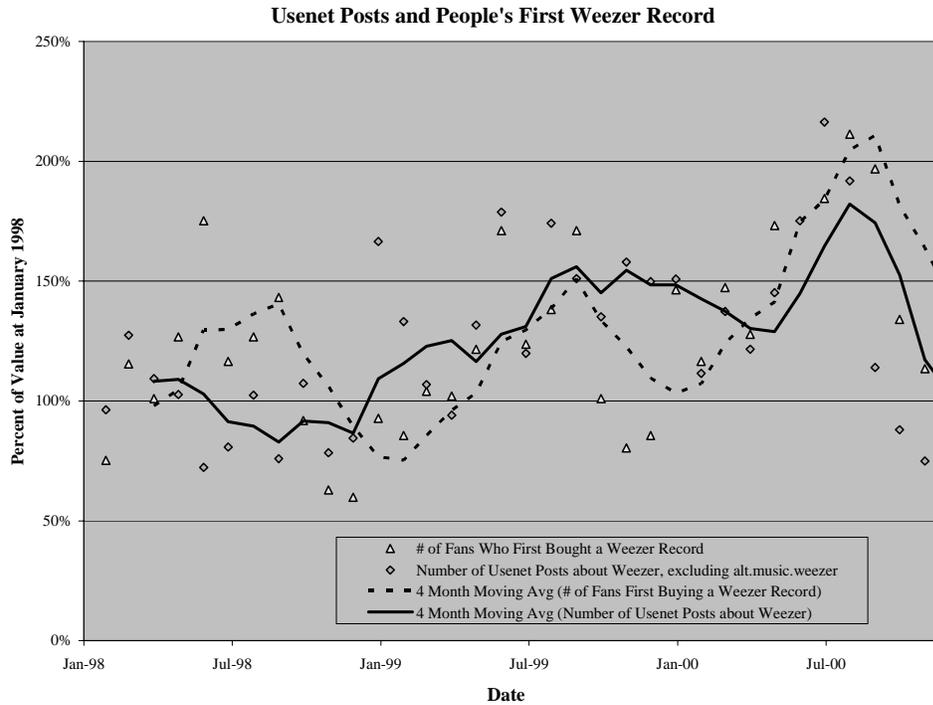
in support of their position.²²⁷ A majority of endorsements of *Pinkerton* on the board fell in line with the current fan description of the album as “raw emotion, frustration, [and] longing,” and by mid-1998, the message board culture firmly supported the conception of *Pinkerton* as a great work.²²⁸ Indeed, when a new member asked if anyone else on the board liked *Pinkerton* better than the self-titled album, another fan responded explaining: “most here do, actually...”²²⁹

Beyond the Weezer discussion lists, Usenet posts about Weezer increased as a whole. There is a general increase in posts about Weezer on all music message boards throughout the hiatus. This increase in Weezer references cannot be attributed to an increase in Usenet use alone as other alternative rock bands who released albums in 1996 and then went on hiatus (such as Soundgarden and Screaming Trees) experienced a leveling off of or decrease in posts about them.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Silverain0@aol.com, “Re: Your 5 favorite albums of all-time,” alt.music.weezer, August 25, 1998.

²²⁹ Popkiller@aol.com, “Re: Hello, I am new here...,” alt.music.weezer, December 20, 1998.



As the graph above shows, there is a relatively strong correlation between number of posts about Weezer and the number of people who bought a Weezer record for the first time, as gauged by the percentage of change in each measure since January 1998. There is a significant r-squared value if one regresses each of the linear ups and downs in Usenet posts with the number of people who first got a Weezer record in the same month. As such, one may conclude that these trends are not just random noise but instead a buzz that translated into people buying Weezer records.

An analysis of the discussion occurring on these boards reveals fans proselytizing on behalf of Weezer and *Pinkerton* in particular. Weezer fans routinely mentioned *Pinkerton* on other message boards, attempting to convince other message board users that *Pinkerton* was a great work. For example, in September 1997, one fan sent the following message to 47 different music Usenet

groups: “Attention all good citizens. Now is the time for you to accept Weezer’s *Pinkerton* as the greatest masterpiece ever created. All disciples of this work of genius speak now.”²³⁰ Six months later, an individual on the alt.music.nirvana board, directly responded to the original pro-*Pinkerton* post, insisting that he or she had just purchased *Pinkerton* and reported to others: “if you don’t have it, get it. i’m just kicking myself cause i didn’t get it sooner.”²³¹ Another of Weezer’s minions concurred with the new *Pinkerton* fan, arguing that “Everyone should know what a great and fantastic album *Pinkerton* is” and suggesting that other board members “pick this album up” because “it’s one of the very best albums released in a while”²³² Another individual, posting in the REM Usenet group, responded to an insinuation that Weezer was a “shallow” band by arguing that “Weezer’s *Pinkerton* is a very in-depth work of art. Masterfully recorded, brilliantly worded.”²³³ One account posted at amazon.com proclaimed *Pinkerton* a “lost classic” and pleaded to others: “let’s rescue it.”²³⁴

A number of Weezer websites were founded during this era as well. Dan Gdowski, former webmaster of weezer.net, recalls the number of visitors to weezer.net, the main fan Weezer fan site, increasing steadily from 1997 until Weezer resumed activity in 2000, with an average of 300-600 hits per day.²³⁵ The Weezer Fan Club also was a prominent site until it was dismantled in 1999, freely

²³⁰ Istrung@rogers.wave.ca, “PINKERTON - WEEZER must be declared best album in history,” alt.music.nirvana, September 14, 1997.

²³¹ Punkrock101@mindspring.com, “PINKERTON - WEEZER must be declared best album in history....well, almost.....,” alt.music.nirvana, April 13, 1998.

²³² Robot700@aol.com, “Re: PINKERTON - WEEZER must be declared best album in history....well, almost.....,” alt.music.nirvana, April 21, 1998.

²³³ Istrung@rogers.wave.ca, “Re: Best album 94-98 by year,” alt.music.rem, June 22, 1998.

²³⁴ Ben Mann, “an already-lost classic, but it’s not too late,” March 13, 1999, Amazon.com.

²³⁵ Dan Gdowski, AOL Instant Messenger Interview. December 26, 2002.

distributing mp3's of the band's rarities to fans. These websites combined with the message boards linking fans with one another resulted in an extremely strong web presence for Weezer. By the fall of 2000, Weezer's fan base had been proved itself so "wired" that Yahoo!, an internet company running a popular search engine, chose Weezer to head the promotional music tour it was sponsoring. Yahoo entertainment brand manager Tiffany Hein noted that Weezer was picked due to its "Net savvy" fan base.²³⁶

The Emo Movement

Pinkerton's reputation as a deeply passionate record received backing from the "emo" subgenre which emerged in the latter half of the 90's. Following in the footsteps of the Rites of Spring and its successor Fugazi, the "emo" movement, short for "emotional," aimed to combine the punk aesthetics with "deeply personal" lyrics.²³⁷ A 90's "indie" scene, emo developed on the periphery of the alternative rock as an underground genre mostly confined to college rock scenes. Brad Cawn, a music writer covering the underground music scene for the *Chicago Tribune*, argues that the mid-90's emo scene had a particularly progressive and inaccessible sound, marked by "weird time signatures and odd tunings."²³⁸ However, by 1998, a growing number of "high school kids from the suburbs" began to infiltrate the scene at the same time as a more melodic brand of emo music began to catch on.²³⁹ Cawn argues that this combination led to an explosion in the popularity of the poppy-branch of emo, as the more

²³⁶ Steve Hochman, "Speeding Tickets," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2001.

²³⁷ *All Music Guide*. "Emo."

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&uid=11:07:55|PM&sql=C4525>

²³⁸ Brad Cawn, AIM Interview with author, March 3, 2003.

accessible emo sound lured in ever greater numbers of suburban kids, which in turn served as a fan base for the “poppier” elements of the emo movement.²⁴⁰

The sound that ultimately emerged from the movement bore a remarkable resemblance to Weezer’s sound, and the bands that became the keystones of the accessible branch of emo, such as the Get Up Kids and The Promise Ring, claimed Weezer as an influence. Some younger elements of the emo scene, then began trumpeting *Pinkerton* as a landmark emo record, and within months, *Pinkerton* had become a central part of the emo canon and an important part of the discourse within the subgenre; Cawn recounts: “*Pinkerton* became pretty personal for most people – it never ceased to amaze me how many people wanted to talk about it.”²⁴¹ For the young brigades constituting an increasingly larger portion the emo fan base, *Pinkerton* served as a “particularly easy reference point” because among that cohort Weezer, if only for their radio singles, had been extremely popular; argues Cawn: “[Weezer] were a lot easier to strike fond memories about than, say, Hum.”²⁴²

By late 1999, then, Weezer had supplanted the actual fathers of the emo subgenre as its central icons. Beyond claims that *Pinkerton* epitomized the hallmarks of the emo sound, the iconography of Weezer acquired an important place within the movement. The thrift-store attire donned onstage by Weezer – “faded cardigan[s], striped shirts,” and Cuomo’s “Buddy Holly” sunglasses – had

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

become a uniform within various “indie” scenes and particularly among the emo crowd. In a November 1999 review of a Get Up Kids show, Cawn argued:

Deep behind the thrift-store shirts and the thick-rimmed glasses, the sugar-sweet sentiments and the punchy power chords, the Get Up Kids and their peers in the burgeoning indie rock subgenre known as emo have a secret to share: It wasn't Nirvana who awoke the empty feeling in Generation X; it was Weezer.²⁴³

In this view, the emo movement matched the needs of a number of well-off suburban kids who “were quite literate, poetry or philosophy and such,” and who failed to relate to mainstream music, which at the time was increasingly testosterone-infused.

As such, *Pinkerton* became a very important record for a new cohort of mobilized young people, who formed a new element of the Weezer fan base. When Weezer reemerged in 2000, these emo fans constituted a particularly vocal section of the fan base; a December 2000 poll conducted by Weezer in order to choose an opening band for the Yahoo! Outloud Tour resulted in the Get Up Kids accruing the most votes. The survey conducted for this project also shows a merging between the Weezer and emo fan bases. Five emo bands (Jimmy Eat World, Dashboard Confessional, Saves the Day, Get Up Kids, and Ozma) place in the most popular 15 bands among poll respondents, with emo act Jimmy Eat World placing first.

Young Artists

Finally, among Weezer's fan base seem to have been a number of young musicians. Ranging in stature from high school garage bands to major label acts, these admirers of Weezer played the role of reputational entrepreneurs on behalf

of Weezer throughout the hiatus, naming the band as influences in interviews, “covering” Weezer songs in concert, and even writing tribute songs. Over the hiatus a parade of new acts emerged that proclaimed Weezer to be extremely influential; as one indie rocker from Dallas noted, seeing Weezer for the first time in 1994 “was like watching a 90’s version of the Beatles – it was a godsend.”²⁴⁴

As Weezer’s success with arty emo fans might attest, among Weezer’s legions of young fans were many budding musicians. Weezer’s appeal to young musicians appears in the wild popularity of the *Weezer* transcription book which laid out piano and guitar parts for Weezer’s debut record. Weezer’s official transcription book outsold all other transcription books in 1996 except that of Alanis Morissette’s *Jagged Little Pill* – an album which has sold 16 million copies. This cohort of individuals learning guitar by playing Weezer songs emerges in the form of garage bands throughout the 1990’s. In the sample of articles I examined, between 1996 and 2000, 12 newspaper features on high school garage bands mention Weezer as an important influence on the band; two of these bands started out as Weezer “cover bands” – that is bands that exclusively performed Weezer’s material.

Beyond these garage bands, a number of established young musicians found Weezer’s music to be particularly influential and lobbied on behalf of the band. Within the sample of articles I examined, during Weezer’s hiatus over 70 different bands cited Weezer as an influence during interviews. Among these were Ben Kweller, who, in a series of interviews on his first national tour in 1997,

²⁴³ Brad Cawn, “Geek Rock is Not Afraid of a Ballad,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 23, 1999.

²⁴⁴ Glen Reynolds, internet interview with author, March 5, 2003.

cited Weezer as a main influence and Rivers Cuomo as his “idol.”²⁴⁵ In the same year, platinum-selling artist Sugar Ray contributed a song called “Rivers” to a movie soundtrack; the song, written in the style of Weezer, was meant as an homage to the Weezer front man. Other artists such as alt-rockers The Deftones and Ash, publicly touted Weezer and covered the band’s songs in concert. Similarly, in July 2000 Jerry Horton, of the platinum-selling band Papa Roach, told the *Telegram & Gazette* that all the acts on the Warped Tour – a tour featuring a collection edgy new punk and hardcore bands – “absolutely look[ed] up to” Weezer.

One of the more notable tributes to Weezer was Weener, a cover band made up of four prominent artists from the Dallas, Texas, music scene. A “supergroup” of sorts that brought together musicians from several popular local acts, Weener debuted in October 1998 to a crowd of 100, largely made up “musicians and scensters,” at a “mid-sized” Dallas club.²⁴⁶ Word spread about the band and by January 1999, the audience had more than tripled, and Weener was able to sell out the 450 person venue.²⁴⁷ Within a month, the band’s popularity had expanded further as Weener sold out a 900 person venue.²⁴⁸ The shows over the following year continued to grow, filling up the venue to capacity and leaving hundreds of others waiting on the streets for tickets. Glen Reynolds, a guitarist and vocalist for Weener, contends that the “indie” crowd – fans of the

²⁴⁵ Ben Wener, “Kids Create New Feelings of Nostalgia,” *The Orange County Register*, May 16, 1997.

²⁴⁶ Reynolds, internet interview.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

burgeoning 90's underground scene – formed the core of Weezer's fan base.²⁴⁹

Weezer's phenomenal success, perhaps, indicates the tremendous cache Weezer held with the late 90's indie scene and the persistence of Weezer's fan base in an era when the future of the band remained in question.

Conclusion

By the time Weezer reemerged in 2000, the band had developed a strong grassroots following both among young adults at large and among several "indie" scenes, particularly the emo community. These individuals proved passionate supporters of the band over the hiatus: proselytizing on behalf the band, representing the band as authentic and insightful, and adopting the band as indie icons. An aesthetic-based community consistent in character with those described by Zillmann and Gan, Weezer fan base proved particularly well organized and connected, using the internet as a source for communication. Not only did these fans sustain communication throughout the hiatus, they initiated a reexamination of Weezer's work – both internally debating the merits of the group's albums and espousing their beliefs to others.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6: PRESS EVALUATIONS OF WEEZER 1998-2001

In this chapter I examine how the press received Weezer throughout the hiatus and upon the band's reemergence in late June 2000. I examine how the tropes used in describing Weezer post-hiatus differ from the pre-hiatus descriptions of the band. Two particular discourses appear in the pieces of 2000-2001: Weezer as an important/classic alternative rock and Weezer as a sincere act. Using an examination of articles from this era, interviews with music writers and a poll of critics, I argue that Weezer's strong "underground" fan support, the band's importance to younger music, and the emergence of a new cohort of critics led to a reconsideration of Weezer's artistic merit. I then also explore the role of commercial interests in disseminating this new conception of the band.

Weezer: A Reappraisal

While in its pre-hiatus incarnation Weezer had never been the type of band one might classify as a "press darling," by the release of their third album in 2001, Weezer had achieved widespread acclaim within the music press.²⁵⁰ The characterizations of Weezer upon its reemergence in late June 2000 used language distinct from that most broadly used prior to Weezer's hiatus. Rather than portraying Weezer as simply a clever power pop band, the pieces began to take on the rhetoric used by Weezer's fan base to describe the band, depicting Weezer's

²⁵⁰ Wayne Bledsoe, "Warped Weezer Still Waiting for Press to Catch Up on Them," *The Knoxville News*. June 13, 1997.

music as essentially sincere and praising the “sophistication” of band’s music, beyond its pop appeal.

Weezer returned to action in the summer of 2000, playing three unannounced shows in southern California, eight shows on the Warped Tour, a series of club shows across the country, and, in February of 2001, the Yahoo! Outloud Tour. Along the way, Weezer met tremendous enthusiasm from both its “cult-like” fan base and a press that had formerly been hesitant to embrace the band. In concert previews and reviews, writers both rehashed the positive elements of the pre-hiatus tropes – Weezer as a smart pop act and Weezer as a fun and ironic band – and incorporated notions of the band as fundamentally sincere beneath its comical veneer. Reviewing Weezer’s third gig back, the *Los Angeles Times* offered a description of Weezer’s catalogue as “wry, sad songs,” a description that conflicted entirely with the band’s pre-hiatus image as unserious jokesters.²⁵¹ Most pieces, however, tried to reconcile the ultra-serious “emo” conception of the band with the conventional wisdom of Weezer as a pop act. For example, one writer pegged Weezer as “balancing bright melodies with brooding lyrics,” while another touted Cuomo as “King Loser” whose “tunes are empowering – a dark comedy of failure, longing and ineptitude cranked up to anthemic proportion.”²⁵²

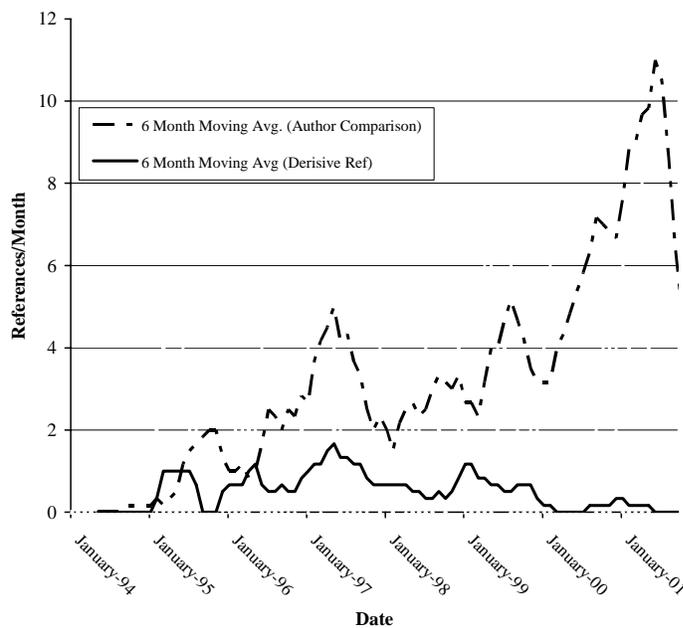
Beyond attributions of authenticity to the band’s lyrics, writers also began crediting Weezer with developing an original sound. Whereas formerly a

²⁵¹ Steve Hochman, “Another Chance to Reach Rock Stardom.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 30, 2000.

²⁵² Greg Kot, “Nerds of Nirvana.” *Chicago Tribune*. March 12, 2001 and Steve Hochman, “KROQ Spreads Holiday Cheer.” *Los Angeles Times*. December 18, 2000.

significant contingent of writers had pegged the aesthetics of Weezer’s music as derivative, by 2001 the faction pegging Weezer’s sound as an innovative fusion of influences had gained the upper hand. Characteristic of this latter group of critics is a *Sun-Times* piece from 2000, which praised Cuomo as “a student of rock history . . . merg[ing] the melodic hooks of Cheap Trick, the punk fury of the Buzzcocks, and the harmony singing of 1960’s girl groups into his own garage rock gems.”²⁵³ Though a number of pieces from 1994 to 1997 had praised Weezer’s sound as original, by 2001, Weezer was seen as both innovative *and* influential on the modern rock sound. One piece, printed in a university

Comparative and Derisive References



paper, epitomizes this conception of Weezer’s sound as a template for future rock acts; the writer contends that a band’s self-labeling as “post-grunge Weezer-esque pop” failed to distinguish the band “since that is precisely today’s ‘Pop/Rock.’” This assessment of Weezer’s sound as a landmark aesthetic also appears in the

number of authors who, throughout the hiatus and even more so upon Weezer's return, describe other bands as Weezer-esque. Nathan Brackett notes the change, recalling that when Weezer first emerged they were "endlessly compared to Pavement, and now bands get called Weezer-like." Increasingly Weezer became used as a point of reference in describing rock/pop acts. The chart above shows that the number of references made to Weezer when describing a band's sound outpaces the number of times Weezer is used as an analogy to a one-hit wonder. Such a trend, then, reveals a growing recognition in the press that Weezer constituted a unique sound by which other acts could be judged.

A Revisionist History

With this new vocabulary being employed to describe Weezer, a series of pieces emerged advocating revisionist conception of Weezer as an "important" band – a tag used to denote canonical artists. Judged to have been influential on the alternative rock scene and the emo subgenre in particular, Weezer began to receive more "serious" treatment than it had encountered prior to the hiatus. The notion of Weezer as canonical, however, was not entirely a post-hiatus phenomenon. In the months prior to Weezer's resumption of performing, pieces began to emerge referencing Weezer in this vein. For example, one piece discussing the career of *Weezer* producer Ric Ocasek, dubbed Weezer's debut a "bubblegrunge classic."²⁵⁴ For the most part, however, the mainstream press'

²⁵³ Bobby Reed, "Weezer at Metro," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 5, 2000.

²⁵⁴ Mike Pattenden, "New Album Releases," *The Times*, March 4, 2000.

serious treatment of Weezer emerged in the latter half of 2000 in a series of articles insisting Weezer had been underappreciated during the pre-hiatus period.

This revisionist camp portrayed Weezer as meaningful artists, unfairly tagged as a novelty act. In a September 2000 piece, *Dallas Observer* writer Zac Crain presented such an account of Weezer's debut record:

The problem is, ["Buddy Holly" and "Undone"] were only the shallow end of a very deep record. Listen to the epic "Only in Dreams"—seven minutes of rock-and-roll catharsis. Or "The World Has Turned and Left Me Here," or, "No One Else," a song with a guitar riff that makes a smile start in your stomach. It was a soundtrack for freaks and geeks, by freaks and geeks.²⁵⁵

This account, tapping the Romantic vocabulary of visceral art, thus forwards an understanding of *Weezer* as a culturally meaningful work and subordinates the humor and irony laced throughout the record to its "inspired" and genuine qualities. Similarly, another writer, in describing Weezer's recipe for achieving the status of legends, dubs "Step 1" as "Releas[ing] monster album that captures [the] zeitgeist of [a] generation."²⁵⁶ As such, interpretations of Weezer's debut record as pop fluff came under sustained criticism.

Pinkerton, as well, underwent a revival as critics emerged trumpeting the album by utilizing rhetoric similar to that which fans had employed on message boards. Chris Riemenschneider, who originally reviewed *Pinkerton* in a positive light by giving the record two and a half out of four stars, served as one of these reputational entrepreneurs. In a September 2000 piece, Riemenschneider portrayed the album as a lost "classic" sharing "a lot in common with [the universally acclaimed Beach Boys record] *Pet Sounds*"; Riemenschneider notes:

²⁵⁵ Zac Crain, "Don't Call It a Comeback." *Dallas Observer*. September 21, 2000.

“as with *Pet Sounds*, fans of Cuomo’s earlier, happier material didn’t get *Pinkerton*. Until now, let’s hope. . . It’s been dissected on fan-driven Web sites the way other classic albums are. In short, it’s starting to get the attention it deserves.”²⁵⁷ Efforts by proponents like Riemenschneider proved successful, and by 2001, *Pinkerton* had emerged, in the words of an *Entertainment Weekly* piece, as “a minor classic, a failed album that has, ironically, revitalized Weezer’s career . . . [and has] gradually won a reputation as one of the 90’s’ great lost albums.”²⁵⁸ Tellingly, within the year, the *All Music Guide* changed *Pinkerton*’s evaluation to a perfect five star rating. As one critic poll respondent tartly observed: “I believe revisionist recent music history now holds up *Pinkerton* as a classic album.”

Concurrently, Cuomo, as the primary author of *Weezer* and as the sole composer of *Pinkerton*, became subject to a cult of personality. Since “so many identify with [his] anthems of gentle alienation,” Cuomo established a reputation as the Romantically tragic “outsider-looking-in that’s the subject of so many of his songs.”²⁵⁹ Built partly upon the mystique of his pre-hiatus shyness toward the media and reports that he had experienced a mental breakdown following the disappointing commercial performance of *Pinkerton*, a reputation of Cuomo emerged as, in the words of one poll respondent, “a troubled genius – a near-Brian Wilson.” Though since 1994 Cuomo had been compared to Brian Wilson for Weezer’s use of Beach Boy-like harmonies, in the post-hiatus pieces, the analogy

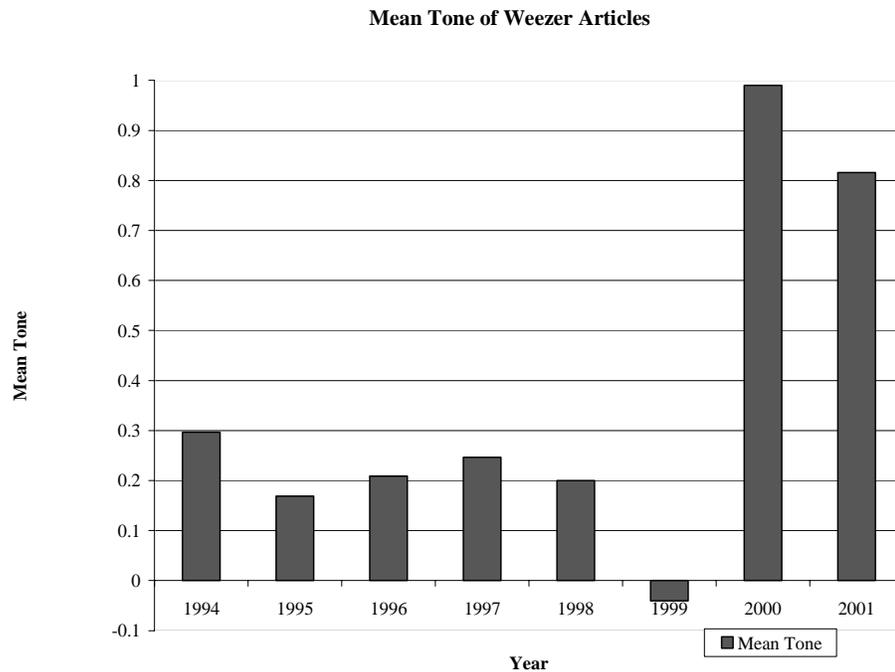
²⁵⁶ Steven Chean, “Weezer.” *New Times Los Angeles*. May 17, 2001.

²⁵⁷ Chris Riemenschneider, “The Best 90’s Rock You Never Heard,” *Austin-American Statesman*, September 7, 2000.

²⁵⁸ Rob Brunner, “Older & Weezer,” *Entertainment Weekly*, May 25, 2001.

²⁵⁹ Joshua Klein, “A New Generation Welcomes Back Weezer,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 2000.

emphasized Cuomo as a Romantic-style genius – a societal misfit who produces great art from within. This trope then emerged in an August 2001 *Rolling Stone* feature titled “Weezer’s Cracked Genius”, which profiled Cuomo and built upon the notion of the “misfit genius.”²⁶⁰



An aggregate analysis of Weezer articles confirms the impact of this revisionist conception of Weezer. Two thousand articles referencing Weezer taken from Factiva’s database were coded according to their tone – if the piece had a positive tone, it was coded 1, if a piece was decidedly mixed it was marked a 0, and if the reference to Weezer was negative, then the article received a -1. Of those two thousand pieces, 417 had a definable tone in either direction. The mean tone for each year is outlined in the graph above. The results reveal a warm reception to Weezer when it first emerged in 1994, a backlash in 1995, and a

²⁶⁰ Chris Mundy, “Weezer’s Cracked Genius.” *Rolling Stone*. September 13, 2001.

more positive response to the band following the release of *Pinkerton* in 1996. Throughout the hiatus, the ratio drops as a number of pieces begin to reference Weezer as the archetypal one-hit wonder novelty act. However, when Weezer reemerges in 2000, the ratio of positive to negative pieces jumps tremendously, and pieces from the first half of 2001 also largely employ a positive tone.

The critic poll results also corroborate a post-hiatus change in tone towards Weezer. Eighty-two percent of respondents say they feel that the music press thinks highly of Weezer or is more positive now than they were pre-hiatus.²⁶¹ One respondent arguing that the revisionist interpretation of Weezer has caught on commented that “writers have generally accepted the band as an important part of today’s music.” Another critic responded by stating, “They may have been seen as a novelty act at first but I think they’re being taken much more seriously now.” Another survey respondent joked that though Weezer “got it then,” the press is “overly emphatic now.”

Although many writers expressed a view that the music journalism community had embraced Weezer, a significant portion of these individuals expressed uncertainty about where the support had originated. For example, one respondent noted that “Weezer has gained respectability over time” but was “not sure why.” Along similar lines, another writer found that “Weezer somehow managed to take on a mythic status between 1994 and 2000 or so,” but does not

²⁶¹ Writers were asked: “What do you think OTHER MUSIC WRITERS’ impressions of Weezer and Weezer’s music today? Have they changed over time, If so, how/why?” While a sizeable portion of respondents were comparative in their answer, e.g., the press didn’t like Weezer before but likes Weezer now, some merely responded with regard to how the press now views Weezer. Of those that did not respond that the press was very favorable to Weezer, a vast majority assessed press opinion as mixed.

“quite understand why this is so.” Finally, another survey respondent noted: “People seem to fall over themselves to praise Weezer and I’m not sure why this particular band has sparked so much passion in the dark musty hearts of critics.”

Regarding their own feelings about Weezer, 74 percent of survey respondents say that they feel positively about Weezer, 2 percent say they formerly felt more positive about Weezer than they do now, 13 percent expressed mixed feelings towards Weezer, 5 percent expressed dislike for Weezer, and 6 percent were not familiar with Weezer.²⁶² Sixty-two percent of respondents say they felt positively about Weezer in 1994, 12 percent maintained neutral or mixed opinions when Weezer first emerged, 16 percent disliked Weezer, and the rest were unfamiliar with the band. Ten respondents who did not like Weezer in 1994 now appreciate the band. Of the respondents who report a favorable assessment towards Weezer only 12 related an account of the band as being “important”; indeed, many respondents commented that while they feel positively towards the band, they felt that *other* members of the press view Weezer more favorably.²⁶³

Locating the Shift

Given this shift in evaluation, one might consider why the music press reevaluated Weezer in the years following the hiatus. There appear to be four

²⁶² These numbers exclude the 70 critics who said they have no opinion about the matter or do not care what other critics write.

²⁶³ Such a pattern may support the claim of one survey participant who noted that Weezer’s “cachet of respect” with critics “has already faded” from its 2001 high. While an extended discussion of how Weezer’s two post-hiatus records have affected their reputation is beyond the scope of this paper, for the most part, the albums have softened the rhetoric of those citing Weezer as “important” while building support among critics who find Weezer’s music to be well-written pop. Both of these records were crafted with the intention of moving away from “personal” lyrics and types of arrangements used on the pre-hiatus albums. Several respondents noted that they felt these works had mitigated the artistic conception of a band, though a few respondents lauded them for this move away from previous work.

primary reasons why Weezer's reputation changed among critics: the intensity of Weezer's following, the growing number of artists advocating on behalf of Weezer, the state of mainstream rock upon Weezer's emergence, and a cohort of young critics who began writing after Weezer's hiatus. While these four causal factors, fleshed out below, initially led to the change in tone towards Weezer, two structural factors significantly broadened the revisionist conception of Weezer: the incentives mainstream magazines had to run stories on Weezer as an increasingly popular band and the inherent attractiveness of a rags-to-riches story.

Weezer as a Cult Phenomenon

Perhaps the definitive factor in altering the press' conception of Weezer during 2000-2001 was the band's strong and enduring fan support, which strengthened a reading of the band as a grassroots phenomenon. Keith Harris, a writer for the *Chicago Reader*, argues that this bottom-up approach of "critics responding to fans" best describes changing attitudes towards Weezer.²⁶⁴ Weezer's cultish fan support has strengthened the band's reputation in three ways: by dispelling notions of Weezer as a novelty act, by supporting claims of Weezer as a cultural touchstone and by actively advocating on behalf of the band. First, Weezer's enduring support, which proved the band to be more than a flash-in-the-pan, undermined those critics who had ridiculed Weezer as a manufactured flavor-of-the-week. In its strong return in 2000, Weezer demonstrated it had been able sustain an enthusiastic and supportive fan base without record company, radio or MTV support. Thor Christensen, critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, argues that "if you stick around for more than two or three years, the novelty band

label fades off pretty quickly,” and with Weezer’s post-hiatus success it was able to definitively shake the novelty tag which had haunted the band since 1994.²⁶⁵

Beyond undermining notions of the band as a novelty act, the cult-like support of the fan base placed the band alongside acts like Led Zeppelin or KISS as authentic cultural touchstones. For many in the music press, Weezer’s strong grassroots tapped into the ideal of rock as a mass-based activity. Whether or not a given writer particularly liked Weezer’s music, the fact that the band resonated so strongly with so many people granted the band a respectability and importance. Claims that Cuomo served as a spokesperson for teenagers lent the band significance as a landmark act whose work genuinely represented the thoughts and emotions of its audience. For example, a *Kansas City Star* concert review noted that Weezer’s albums had become “dog-eared scriptures for many of its young-adult fans.”²⁶⁶ Such a sentiment also appeared in a *Chicago Sun-Times* piece from March 2001 which argued that “it’s disconcerting to think that a sizable segment of Generation Y regards Weezer as ‘classic rock,’ but then it’s better to admire Cuomo & Company than, say, Bush.”²⁶⁷ Similarly, one *Chicago Tribune* writer suggested that “Weezer just might be one of the biggest rock bands of the ‘90s” supporting this speculation with a quote from a young fan proclaiming Weezer to be “the Led Zeppelin of my generation.”²⁶⁸ Thus, with

²⁶⁴ Harris, telephone interview.

²⁶⁵ Christensen, telephone interview.

²⁶⁶ Timothy Finn, “Weezer Gets Crowd Rocking with Old Favorites,” *The Kansas City Star*, March 14, 2001.

²⁶⁷ Jim DeRogatis, “A Tight Weezer Sound Fresh Again at Aragon,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 11, 2001.

²⁶⁸ Kot, “Nerds of Nirvana.”

its grassroots support, Weezer established a reputation as an authentic voice for the emo subgenre and disaffected teenagers everywhere.

Finally, and perhaps most significant, is the role Weezer's "cult" played in successfully advancing an alternate interpretation of the band and influencing the rhetoric the press used to describe Weezer's music. The Weezer fan base ultimately proved able to exercise its well-organized network to spread an image of the band as an authentic and meaningful act. Several factors promoted the success of the fan network in changing the way the press thought about the band. First, many within Weezer's fan base fit Shuker's model of the "aficionado" – fans knowledgeable about music history, the genre's aesthetic standards, and familiar with the vocabulary of music criticism.²⁶⁹ Filled with smart, arty kids and burgeoning musicians, Weezer's fan base articulated their vision of the band in the language of critics. Posts on alt.music.weezer tap the press' notions of authenticity, and situate the work's autobiographical subject matter within that frame of reference. Similarly, discussions of the musical surface of the records make reference to the work of various record producers, guitar techniques and terms taken from music theory.

As such, the fans' support of the band entered directly into dialogue with critics. Tom Moon, music critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, argues that fans play a crucial role in the "conversation" continually being conducted in assessments of rock music. Moon notes the role that the fans of jam bands such as Phish have played in the framing of music: "Certainly in some communities the fans have helped provide background context and insight into things. On some of

the message boards that the jam band fans frequent there are actually times where people have really put things into perspective in a way that another artist might not.”²⁷⁰ Message boards, then, may have played an analogous role for Weezer as fans reframed Weezer’s place within the rock landscape, providing novel background about the songs and communicating alternate interpretations of the band’s music.

Second, Weezer’s fan base proved highly organized and mobilized. As evidenced by the large percentage of fans who say they talked about the band with friends, Weezer was well integrated into the social lives of its fans, which enabled the efficient circulating of ideas throughout the fan base. Weezer’s message boards and mailing lists in particular acted as organized forums in which to debate matters related to the band and disseminated those contested ideas to the rest of the fan base. Rather than being confined to fleeting discussions in high school hallways, conversations about Weezer found, in message boards, a permanent, written medium. As such, notions of *Pinkerton* as a touching and revealing album and of *Weezer* as a bible for geeky youth were quickly disseminated, finding favor among many Weezer fans within a matter of weeks.

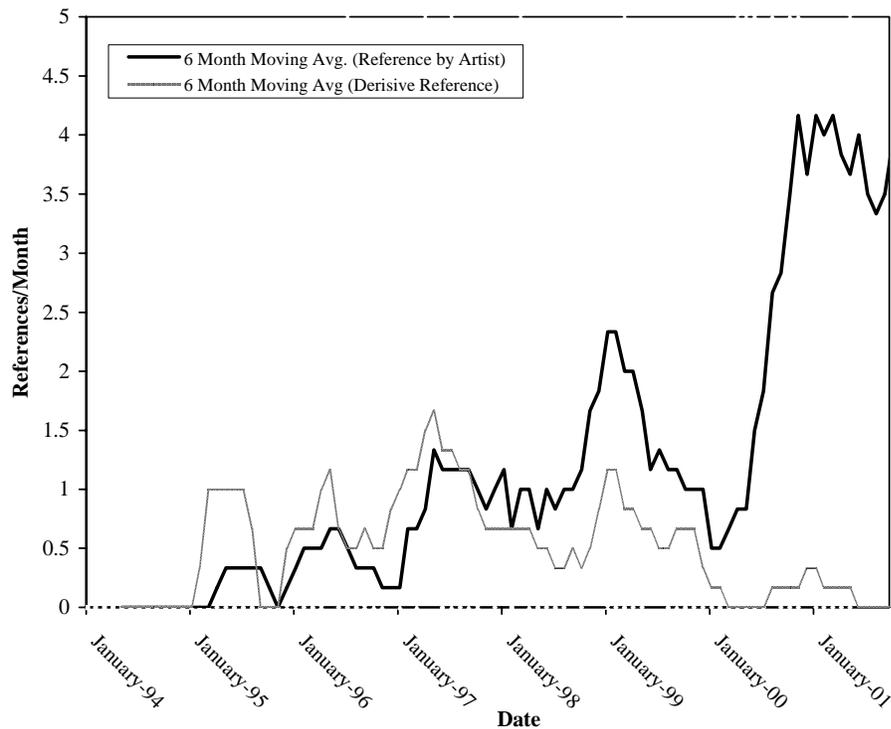
The mobilized fan base also proved to be an effective proselytizer for the band. The legions of Weezer fans attesting to the band’s merits to their friends and acquaintances increased the size of the fan base during the hiatus, thereby creating new fans whose support for the band was based on the Weezer cult’s read on the band’s work. The fans’ missionary work was not limited to recruiting their

²⁶⁹ Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 230.

²⁷⁰ Moon, telephone interview.

friends to listen to the band; fans supported the band in innumerable other ways including posting reviews in support of the band at amazon.com and calling radio stations to ask them to play Weezer. The Weezer fan base proved so mobilized that when, in the summer of 2002, *Rolling Stone* set up a reader's poll to determine the top 100 albums rock albums of all time, Weezer fans were able to vote all four of the band's albums to the list with *Pinkerton* being voted the 16th best record of all time.

Artist and Derisive References



Young Musicians

A second crucial source of support for the notion of Weezer as being “important” to the canon of rock was the backing of a number of young artists who cited Weezer as an influence on their work. As the graph above suggests,

beginning in 1997, publications, within the sample of articles, published an average of one to two Weezer references by artists every month. These young artists' support of Weezer was not lost on critics. One critic poll respondent noted that there has been a "general respect from other artists towards Weezer. They've always had that ever since 1994"; Weezer's music "has always been stellar from other musician's viewpoints." Thus, as the crop of bands influenced by Weezer emerged from 1997 to 2000 and cited the band as being a "serious" rock act, music writers were forced to reexamine their impressions of Weezer. Moon argues that such endorsements "promote a reevaluation" of an act. Moon notes that "people who are involved in the making of music are often more careful scholars than the critics" and as such if in an interview "an artist . . . rave[s] about a record," a writer is likely to "go back and revisit it."²⁷¹

Second, regardless of whether the critic *agreed* with the musician's assessment, these artists' claims of Weezer as an influence served to sew the band into rock's narrative. Given the strong norms within the rock community to construct genre histories and a taxonomy of influences, ignoring Weezer or treating it as an unsubstantial act became impossible as a growing number of artists situated their own music in reference to Weezer's. In particular, the emo subgenre's adoption of *Pinkerton* as a critical record within the subgenre privileged Weezer as a "serious" act. Indeed, one critic poll respondent argued that Weezer's reacceptance in the mainstream depended tremendously on "their status as being a big influence on the 'new' crop of emo bands." Thus, by central

²⁷¹ Ibid.

emo acts like The Get Up Kids and The Promise Ring consecrating *Pinkerton* as a masterpiece, Weezer's place in the subgenre's canon had been assured.

Changes in Modern Rock

Third, upon its return, Weezer served as a foil to the critically disliked modern radio rock of the era. By the time Weezer reemerged in 2000, the "alternative music" featured on the radio had undergone tremendous changes. Acts which had been part of the late 80's underground scene had vanished from the airwaves and been replaced by aggressive-sounding acts, many of which fused heavy metal with rap. Critics nearly uniformly found this radio alternative music unappealing; within the critic survey 121 respondents felt that music played in the modern rock radio format was weaker in 2000 than in 1994, and only 6 felt that alternative music had improved over the decade. One survey respondent charged the new modern rock acts as being "for the most part limper, more insipid, more calculatedly commercial and generally shittier in nearly every aspect" than the acts which had preceded them; argued another respondent: "Forget art. Today's 'modern rock' is mostly disposable, forgettable sludge." Respondents to the critic poll had no shortage of derogatory descriptions of the genre: dank, rank, unlistenable, insincere, "corporate lite," meaner, uglier, boring, "dumbed-down musically and lyrically," homogenous, and bland, among others.

In contrast to the amelodic testosterone-infused late 90's modern rock, Weezer's 60's pop-infused sound proved a welcome change for some critics. As such, critics strongly encouraged to cover popular modern rock acts were more likely to cover Weezer than their rap-rock modern rock compatriots. Noted one

survey respondent: “it was nice to see the band emerge from one-hit wonder status to rock powerhouse again at a time when rock-rap schlock was dominating the airwaves.” These sentiments even took the form of a handful of hyperbolic pieces touting Weezer as a band to “rescue” rock; one survey respondent commented with some incredulity that with the release of Weezer’s post-hiatus album, “music writers jumped on a bandwagon that heralded Weezer as some kind of savior of rock.”

Cohort of Young Critics

By 2000, a new cohort of young critics with a very different experience of Weezer’s music had begun to write for major newspapers and magazines. These critics emerged from a college rock scene where Weezer held tremendous cache, and this alternate frame of reference appears in their judgments of the band. The average age of 12 writers in the critic poll who personally felt that Weezer was important was 29 years old, five years younger than the mean of the rest of the critics. Indeed, university newspaper accounts of Weezer’s revival are among the most ebullient in their descriptions of Weezer’s catalog, citing Weezer’s songs as “classics” and “legendary tunes.”²⁷² One survey respondent has found this cohort pattern to have been particularly influential: “I think more music writers that are around today came of age with Weezer (and *Pinkerton* especially) so, in general, there’s more respect for Weezer today.”

²⁷² Dan Julian, “Weezer Returns to Sold-Out Detroit Crowd,” *The State News*, September 5, 2000 and Aaron Lalic, “Weezer is a Music Pleaser,” *The Shorthorn*, June 14, 2001.

Chain Reaction

With interest in Weezer high upon its return and with legions of loyal Weezer fans eager to buy magazines featuring their favorite band, a series of mainstream music magazine features on Weezer emerged within a year of the band's return. *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Kerrang*, *Alternative Press*, *Revolver*, *New Music Express*, *Rockpile*, and *Request* magazine, among others, had all either featured Weezer on their covers or devoted a significant spread to the band by mid-2001. These articles, generally presenting the revisionist interpretation of Weezer, served to codify the Weezer-as-important trope. Harris argues that once one magazine deemed Weezer's revival newsworthy, others followed in line: "Once this revival came around, it fed off itself at the national level where one magazine covered it and then from there on" others did as well.²⁷³ Several survey respondents noted the support of Weezer by these taste makers provided the crucial factor in changing the language used to describe Weezer; one respondent argues: "Music writers who weren't familiar with Weezer might have jumped on the 'oh they're great' bandwagon because the band was featured so prominently in major music magazines and hyped excessively." Another survey suspects that commercial interests underlie these magazine pieces' positive tone towards Weezer: "Mainstream media have definitely swung the popular vote. *Rolling Stone* now regards *Pinkerton* in print as a 'neglected treasure.' It appears to me that they just love Weezer now that they are selling records again."

Whether such "bottom line" calculations played a role is debatable, but Weezer's story clearly made for moderately interesting articles. *Rolling Stone's*

Anthony DeCurtis contends that music writers have a tendency, for the sake of an interesting story, to “review a phenomena” – the “press about a band” or the “photographs of a band” – rather than the music itself, and the pieces written on Weezer in 2001 take on this character. Harris argues that the compelling nature of Weezer’s riches-to-rags-to-riches story “definitely sparked the reevaluation – if Weezer had just put out a record and there wasn’t this massive underground following ready to pop up, they wouldn’t have gotten the attention.” One survey respondent concurred, cynically commenting that Cuomo “has proven easy fodder for writing: He went crazy, then went to Harvard, developed a rabid, freaky fan base. So it’s easy copy. Half of any review writes itself.” As such, Weezer’s positive press snowballed with each piece laying the groundwork for the next piece to remark on the Weezer phenomenon.

Conclusion

Thus, by mid-2001, the press had engaged in a reevaluation of Weezer’s place within the rock landscape. Whereas formerly Weezer had either been dismissed as a novelty act or appreciated as a talented but lightweight pop group, in 2001, a new interpretation of Weezer, one which took them as a “serious” rock act with a place in the rock canon, had emerged. This alternate reading of Weezer, formulated by its young fans – including young artists and music critics – took hold in the music press throughout 2000 and was popularized and codified by a series of articles run in large-circulation music magazines during the first half of 2001.

²⁷³ Harris, telephone interview.

The success of the revisionist interpretation of Weezer underscores the important role that fans play in the discussions of artistic value within the art community. Because the language of criticism is so accessible to fans, Weezer's aficionados were able to stake claims about the band that ultimately altered the frame of reference music writers used to evaluate the band. Moon underscores the necessity, in evaluating music, of remaining attuned to the "conversation that goes on within the music and around the music with artists and critics and journalists and radio people and the whole gamut that, hopefully, brings you to a more nuanced appreciation" of the work.²⁷⁴ Thus, while music criticism may support some notion of an inspired reading, the lack of truly legitimated institutions eliminates the brand of elite/privileged authorities that are charged with making the final judgments in autonomous art worlds and invites more open deliberation about the consecration of works.

²⁷⁴ Moon, telephone interview.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The preceding pages have outlined at least one pathway by which an artist may achieve a degree of consecration. The reinterpretation of Weezer's artistic merit in 2000-2001 reveals consecration within the rock tradition to be a malleable process – subject to the voices of many actors and a variety of social forces. Indeed, in the months following the release of Weezer's third and fourth albums, a second reevaluation occurred as some writers and even some fans backed away from rhetoric identifying Weezer as a canonical act. The microhistory presented in the previous pages underscores three important properties of debates of artistic merit within the rock community: the impact of a lack of legitimate authorities in the activity, the importance that social forces contemporaneous with a piece's production play in its evaluation, and the open nature of debates over artistic merit.

Findings

First, unlike activities falling within the FRP, rock music has never had legitimate authorities – universities or prestigious museums, for example – that have been able to definitively outline which rules should govern the evaluation of rock music. Consequently, the chorale of voices and traditions which have emerged within rock music is uniquely prone to producing divergent judgments which must be internally reconciled, rather than settled by a particular authority. Representative of a young discipline without a singular ideology, rock music's

canon has proven particularly unstable as norms informing aesthetic judgments that lack grounding in particular loci, such as universities, swing from one direction to the other over short periods. In one year, Weezer may be read as a fun but ultimately inconsequential alternative rock act and in another, as an important rock outfit, inspiring great music and artistically representing the concerns of the masses. Thus, while norms concerning consecration *do* exist within the rock community, as outlined in the chapters two and three, rock lacks a legitimized, inherited ideology to organize the discipline's collective memory.

Second, that considerations of a band's importance and its place within rock history have always occurred in the same era as the music has been produced further complicates judgments of artistic merit within the rock music. DeCurtis argues that such a feature of contemporaneousness makes writing about rock music particularly empowering; a participant in discussions of how music should be evaluated is "free of the history of interpretation" in interpreting newly created works.²⁷⁵ While any active art form which continues to integrate freshly produced work into its canon experiences such freedom, the unstructured and inclusive nature of the rock community's debates promote drastic swings or fashions in the assessment of its music, perhaps more so than established disciplines; argues DeCurtis, "When you're living contemporaneously with art, it's difficult to separate it from anything else that's going on around it and then again that's part of what's exciting about it."²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ DeCurtis, telephone interview.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

For the case of Weezer, this thesis has shown how a number of contingencies – the demographics of Weezer’s fan base, changes in the norms of alternative rock, and even the initial commercial success of alternative rock – informed fans and critics’ readings of Weezer’s music. Critics in 1995 interpreted Weezer in light of contemporary events – the growing number of packaged alternative acts, the juvenile nature of Weezer’s audience, commercial radio’s and MTV’s decisions to play Weezer’s music in regular rotation. While the ideal may be to listen to the music on its own terms without its sociological context, once one is aware of these contextual clues, they unavoidably become what part of what one is evaluating; argues DeCurtis, once you are aware of extramusical elements, “You’re hearing it in a different way necessarily – you can’t un-know.”²⁷⁷ The microhistory presented in this thesis corroborates this claim; while such extramusical elements provoked, in some, a highly negative reaction to Weezer in the mid-90’s, by 2001 the buzz about Weezer as a particularly authentic and important act primed audiences to read their music in such a fashion.

Third, and perhaps most interestingly, the case study presented in this thesis outlines the open and egalitarian nature of debates about artistic merit within rock music. Though the rock community contains elements that wish to regard the activity as an inspired “high art” outside the boundaries of commercialism, there exists a strong current maintaining the art form as a mass-based enterprise. With rock’s low bar to enter into debate about aesthetic merits, any young adult with a minimal level of musical knowledge can play a role in the

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

consecration of art. Indeed, even becoming a practitioner in the discipline as a rock artist remains accessible to any individual with 100 dollars with which to buy a guitar. As such, rock has reconciled the notion of “inspired readings” with egalitarian principles; though many judgments in rock are informed by a sense that some evaluators are more qualified than others, the number of competent judges is immense. Thus, the middle school, high school and college students who first took to Weezer in 1995 were able to, within half a decade, become important players in debates over consecration of the band.

The case of Weezer shows how both mass-based tropes concerning authenticity as well as the economics of rock music empower the masses in participating in a dialog with the elite elements of activity. Weezer’s post-hiatus success in garnering critical recognition can be traced to both ideational and economic factors; ideationally, the notion that Weezer spoke for hundreds of thousands of teenagers proved particularly important in the reassessment of the band while, simultaneously, Weezer’s growing popularity prompted magazines and newspapers to cover the band in order to sell copies of their publication. As such, rock necessarily cannot leave behind masses, despite its aspirations to interpret itself as something more than a commodity; the masses remain tied both ideologically and financially to the success of the discipline.

Finally, this thesis has revealed the canon to be the product of a contingent, agent-oriented process; to reference, perhaps usefully, a cliché: the cream does not necessarily rise to the top – some constellations of agents put it there. This study shows that collective memory within a discipline is not a

naturally occurring phenomenon by which sociological factors that somehow “interfere” with the reading of the music fall by the wayside, canceling each other out. Rather an act’s legacy is ultimately the product of reputational entrepreneurs advocating either on behalf of or against the merits of a particular artist. In the case of Weezer, judgments of *Pinkerton* as a classic did not merely result from the passage of time but rather from a mobilized contingent of supporters whose views were ultimately codified by writers. Even this codification proved subject to contingency as writers seeking a good story found an incentive to write about Weezer. Thus, if the revisionist conception of Weezer ultimately holds, the band’s music is only partly responsible; successful lobbying by supporters and writers’ keenness to write stories on Weezer also will have played a significant role.

Areas for Future Research

The research presented here presents several opportunities for future research. One project which immediately follows from this research is an attempt to examine to what extent deliberation within rock music is a democratic process. The research presented in this thesis shows fans to be an integral part in the development of the rock canon; however it remains unclear to what extent the boundaries of the debate and the language in which the discussion occurs is dictated by the elite elements within the rock community. It remains possible that fans merely adopt a rubric established for them by the critics. The research presented here tenuously points to a conclusion that supports a democratic understanding of these debates. This thesis shows that fans play an important role

in defining notions of authenticity and originality; however, there remains much potential for specific research to answer this question.

Second, with several institutions available to preserve the legacy of a band, further work could be done to examine in which institutions in particular a band's legacy lies. This research project has shown the music press to be an important factor in codifying claims of a band's artistic merit and to be particularly responsive to fans. However, further research could be done on cases where the press did not adopt the fans' account of a band. This thesis's research indicates that even if music critics do not agree with the fans' assessment, with enough vocal fan support, critics are willing to grudgingly accept a band's importance as a social fact, even if they do not themselves agree. However, Weezer, which ultimately carried favor with a large number of critics, may not be as good of a case in answering this question as a band which did not garner a significant degree of critical backing.

Third, as this thesis engaged in a case study of the debate surrounding a single band, a wider analysis of the magnitude of the role that fans can play in debates of artistic merit would prove interesting. One may hypothesize that, in most cases, vocal fan support does not result in acceptance of the fans' claims by artists or critics – perhaps the case of Weezer is an exception. An aggregate analysis might show that, on average, fans' voices are acknowledged in the form of more features on popular bands and more reviews, but that ultimately such acts never gain canonical status. The results of this study show Weezer fans to have succeeded in achieving recognition for the band in two ways: both by actively

shaping the tropes used in describing the band and by launching Weezer to the ranks of populist stars, voices of a subculture. Perhaps these two causal factors do not always coincide; a project to answer such questions could prove quite interesting.

Finally, a related project could evaluate the degree to which fans, artists and critics frame rock as a highbrow art (or aspiring highbrow art) or a middlebrow art. While a vast majority of respondents to the survey spoke of rock in terms of having highbrow features, a few critics and fans argued in a manner consistent with Bourdieu's conception of a middlebrow art, supporting the notions that there are no inspired readings of rock music, that all judgments are ultimately subjective/relative, and that rock should ultimately be judged according to whether it viscerally affects the masses, regardless of whether "knowledgeable" interpreters evaluate the music as lacking merit.

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