

ROCK PRESS: UP FROM THE UNDERGROUND

At the tender age of nine, the rock press—that's rock as in *Stone*—has grown into a hardy institution with a combined circulation of over one million and with individual issues that outsell the glossy newsweeklies on the stands. The rock papers have gone from semiliteracy to slick writing and four-color formats. While many of today's rock magazines would just as soon feature an interview with Daniel Ellsberg or Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., as a rap with Mick Jagger, their mainstay remains the music scene and the record company advertising which helps to keep them financially solvent.

Born in January 1966 in the wake of a thriving underground press, the first publication to offer "intelligent writing about pop music" was *Crawdaddy!*, a ten-page mimeographed paper every bit as brash as the exclamation mark on its masthead. In November of the following year, *Rolling Stone* began printing with a \$7,500 investment and custom lettering acquired from the defunct weekly edition of *Ramparts*. Providing news of the rock world, juicy gossip about groups and groupies, authoritative record reviews, and in-depth reports on the counterculture, the rock papers quickly found a hard-core audience. And by consciously avoiding radical politics, they gave advertisers a safe alternative to the underground press. The subterranean papers were soon little more than a memory while the rock press continued to prosper.

As their editors advanced toward the mellowing age of thirty, the concerns of the rock papers became both more varied and more conventional; they gained establishment respectability and profits, but lost the scruffy punk charm that had been so much a part of their early appeal.

The times they certainly are a-changing when *Rolling Stone's* "Dope Page" of yesterday has given way to a regular column unblushingly called "Drinking." *Stone's* twenty-eight-year-old founder and editor, Jann Wenner, has aggressively expanded the tabloid's political and investigative reporting, often devoting more than half of each issue to nonmusical topics. While about three quarters of its readers still profess to buy the magazine for its music coverage, *Rolling Stone* must be doing something right: it leads the rock press with a circulation of four hundred thousand copies, making the notoriously autocratic Wenner head of a five-million-dollar publishing empire.

Encouraged by *Rolling Stone's* success, several other rock publications have shifted their emphasis to cultural and general news coverage. Editor Robert Somma has made Boston-based *Fusion* the only rock magazine to consistently print interesting new fiction. Saved from an untimely end by a wealthy investor who bought his son a rock magazine to edit, the latest incarnation of *Crawdaddy!*—with a shiny cover but without its!—offers monthly columns by members of the Firesign Theater comedy team and by Paul Krassner, the perennial iconoclast. Perhaps the most radically altered of the rock tabloids is *Changes*, "journal of arts and entertainment," which has adopted an austere format reminiscent of the *New York Review of Books*.

More women than men purchase records in this country, but nearly three quarters of the rock papers' audience is male. *Crawdaddy!* editor Peter Knobler comments, "For every girl who wants to sleep with a rock star, there are two guys who would like to be in his boots." Whatever their fantasies, a generation gap has begun to appear in their midst. The teenager who recently came of listening

age, and for whom the music is still exhilarating and liberating, has little in common with the somewhat jaded older reader of the news-oriented rock papers.

To satisfy the tastes of the latest rock generation, several publications now devote themselves to reporting on the pop music scene. In a tone closer to fan magazine fluff than New Journalism grit, they cover the small galaxy of British stars and American heavy rockers who are the current favorites of Middle America. With readers starved for the exotic and the outrageous, these magazines were the first to respond to the impact of glitter and ersatz decadence in rock music. Second only to *Rolling Stone* in circulation and quickly catching up, *Circus* rode on the coattails of Alice Cooper's success by continually featuring him on their cover. *Circus's* recent growth has spawned a sister publication, *Raves*, almost identical in appearance and already third in sales after less than a year on the stands. Calling itself "America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine," Michigan-based *Creem* offers coverage of British flash and Midwestern heavy metal with an irreverence that makes it the most entertaining of the music-only magazines.

The growing popularity of the rock papers has turned their writers and critics into cult celebrities. The legendary R. Meltzer has written a scatological autobiography that may be considered too hard-core for any publisher to handle. Patti Smith, erstwhile rock critic, is now a cabaret singer of some renown. With such talented rock writers moving on to other forms, it seems just a matter of time before the rock press will be recognized as a major breeding ground for some of the important young writers of this generation.—
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