Reading the 1970s in *Creem* Magazine

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

University of Virginia

May, 2021

Creem was published out of Detroit from 1969 to 1985 and cemented its role as *Rolling Stone's* upstart competitor by calling itself "America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine." The publication is best remembered as the longtime home of "America's greatest rock critic" Lester Bangs, as well as for being the place critics first theorized and defined heavy metal and punk rock.[1] The nostalgia that often colors discussions of the publication tends to ignore how *Creem* changed over time. The way *Creem* evolved over the course of the 1970s reflects the broader political realignment that took place in the U.S. during the tumultuous decade, as the New Right created a powerful base by fracturing the New Deal coalition and building an alliance between white working-class Americans and conservative elites.[2] There is a stereotype that fans of rock music lean Left on the political spectrum, but an examination of *Creem* reveals the changing political ideologies of some rock fans and critics during this time period.[3] As *Creem* published a substantial amount of sexist and homophobic content, policed the boundaries of masculinity, erased Black artists, switched from a local to a national orientation, and embraced neoliberal ideologies, the magazine manifested the political changes occurring in the U.S. as the country shifted to the Right.

Creem was created in the vibrant counterculture of late 1960s Detroit and covered the local music scene with a radical sensibility. Attention to the magazine's coverage of Black and

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[1] Jim DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt: The Life & Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000).

[2] Joseph E. Lowndes, "Beyond the Backlash Thesis," in *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Conservatism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1–10.

[3] Historians have also examined the ways that different popular music genres—including rock, heavy metal, and country—during the 1970s and 1980s echoed the conservative politics of the era. Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (November 19, 2007): 276–306, https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2007.0050; Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Steve Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, 2014th ed. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

female artists, as well as its contributors' changing rhetoric around race, gender, and sexuality, reveals the political shifts that occurred at *Creem* during the decade. As the 1970s progressed, features on Black artists disappeared from a magazine that had formerly championed them. When discussions of female artists such as Grace Slick, Joan Jett, Debbie Harry, and Stevie Nicks began to be included in the mid-1970s, they were sexualized and insulted. Scholars including Robert Self and Natasha Zaretksy have emphasized the way political realignment during the 1970s turned the realm of gender, sexuality, and the family into a battlefield, and this is shift is evident in reading a decade of *Creem*.[4] In 1971 two events in the magazine's history, its move from the inner city to the suburbs and the arrival of Lester Bangs, marked the beginning of these changes.

Creem's political perspective had important consequences for the future of rock music. Popular music scholars, including Simon Frith (who wrote a recurring column in *Creem*), have identified the role rock critics occupy as arbiters of music industry success as well as ideological gatekeepers for fan communities. Frith writes that underground papers like *Creem* were "the source of what became the dominant ideology of rock."[5] Bangs, who wrote many of his most famous articles for *Creem* and was an editor of the publication, is considered to be one of the most influential rock critics. According to music scholar Steve Waksman, Lester Bangs' "highly gendered, self-consciously masculine" ideal of rock music "infused subsequent developments in 1970s rock… [so that] rock remained, to no small degree, gender-exclusive terrain."[6] What Bangs and other critics told *Creem* readers rock music was about became for many canonical.

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[4] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[5] Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981). p. 165, 169.
[6] Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk*, p. 57.

They helped to create the notion of rock music as white and masculine for decades after the magazine folded.

By the end of the 1970s, *Creem* writers influenced by Bangs wrote sexist and homophobic articles and encouraged similar rhetoric from fans through the magazine's letters to the editor section. While in its earlier years the magazine had disparaged the rock star as a symbol of corporate decadence, *Creem* became increasingly enamored with celebrity and material excess. By the time *Creem* owner Barry Kramer died from an accidental overdose in 1981 and the magazine was sold to pay his debts in 1985, *Creem* had renounced the radicalism that had defined it upon its founding.[7] The New Right's coalition was riddled with contradictions as politicians used nostalgia and racial and gender anxieties to unite a broad swath of mostly white, suburban Americans against the progress and ideals of the social movements of the 1960s.[8] Reading *Creem* shows that some rock fans were among the disparate groups that embraced New Right ideologies during the 1970s.

Creem and the Counterculture

Creem was born in Detroit's unique counterculture scene. The magazine came from the same milieu that produced John Sinclair's White Panther Party, a group conceived of as white auxiliaries to the Black Panther Party, and its musical counterpart, the rock band the MC5.[9] Sinclair and the White Panther Party sought to use music to achieve a "total assault on the culture" and create a grassroots revolution via the MC5's rock and roll.[10] Sinclair envisioned revolution as an alliance between white and Black poor people who were similarly oppressed by

[7] Leslie Pielack, "Cocky Colorful Crazy CREEM," *Michigan History Magazine* 99, no. 4 (July 1, 2015).
[8] Self, *All in the Family*, p. 341-2.
[9] David A. Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution: The Birth of Detroit Rock "n" Roll* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 202-203.
[10] Mathew Bartkowiak, "Motor City Burning: Rock and Rebellion in the WPP and the MC5," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 2 (2008): 55–76, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsr.2008.0000.

American capitalism and mainstream culture. Sinclair contributed to *Creem* in the magazine's early days, and *Creem* supported Sinclair during his highly publicized trial and imprisonment.[11] An icon of 1960s Detroit, Sinclair may be best remembered for the punitive ten-year prison sentence he received for selling two marijuana joints to an undercover police officer, which motivated John Lennon and Yoko Ono to come to Ann Arbor and headline a benefit concert to protest for his freedom.[12] Though lacking an official position with *Creem*, Sinclair's influence loomed large over the magazine as it was born out of the underground newspaper he helped run, *The Fifth Estate*.

Creem was founded in 1969 by the British writer and Detroit transplant Tony Reay, who parlayed his work as a music columnist and editor for *The Fifth Estate* into a publication focused on Detroit's music scene. When Reay started the magazine, he was working at a headshop run by the future owner of *Creem,* Barry Kramer, and writing a regular *Fifth Estate* column called "Mixed Mead Ear."[13] During the 1960s, *The Fifth Estate* covered local Detroit politics and news with a radical sensibility and a position in solidarity with Black communities in Detroit. The rampant police brutality of the Detroit Police Department received regular coverage, as did the organizing of such Detroit-based Black radical groups as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.[14]

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[11] John Sinclair, "Liberation Music," *Creem*, December 1970, p. 18-22.; John Sinclair, "John Sinclair: a letter from prison, another side of the MC5 story, and (incidentally) the end of an era," *Creem*, 2 no. 8 (1969) 10-14, 27-31.; "Everyone Benefits," *Creem*, 2 no. 9 (1969).

[12] After serving two and a half years of his sentence, Sinclair was granted bond, and in March 1972, the Michigan Supreme Court overturned his conviction and ruled that the strict marijuana law that had landed him in prison was unconstitutional. David A. Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution: The Birth of Detroit Rock "n" Roll* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 107-119, 164-194, 266-269; Steve Miller, *Detroit Rock City: The Uncensored History of Rock "n" Roll in America's Loudest City* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013), p. 56-60.

[13] David A. Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution: The Birth of Detroit Rock "n" Roll* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 202; Tony Reay, "Mixed Mead Ear," *The Fifth Estate*, November 14, 1968. Sinclair also wrote a music column in *The Fifth Estate,* called "Rock & Roll Dope."

[14] Chris Singer, "The New Bethel Incident," *The Fifth Estate*, April 17, 1969; John Sinclair, "Pigs Attack Sinclair," *The Fifth Estate*, August 1, 1968; The Fifth Estate, "League of Revolutionary Black Workers: An Interview with John Watson Part 1," *The Fifth Estate*, May 1, 1969.

Greater Detroit in the 1960s was a hotbed of radical political activity from the shopfloor to the university classroom to the rock club. In addition to Sinclair, the MC5, and the White Panther Party, Michigan was the birthplace of the Students for a Democratic Society. SDS emerged from a University of Michigan student organization and published the influential Port Huron Statement in June 1962 after flagship members attended a United Auto Workers summer camp in Port Huron, Michigan.[15] The University of Michigan, just an hour away from Detroit in Ann Arbor, was home to the first "teach-in" on the Vietnam War in March 1965.[16] Black radical politics in Detroit were also active, with student activists at Wayne State creating their own publication (*The Inner City Voice*) to aid in their organizing work with the Revolutionary Union Movement that swept Detroit's factories radicalizing Black autoworkers.[17] Black activists also created their own religious spaces, with the Nation of Islam and the Shrine of the Black Madonna both well-established institutions founded in Detroit, as well as their own media organizations and bookstores.[18] Young Black activists in Detroit formed a local branch of the Black Panther Party in the wake of the 1967 rebellion, and added the *Black Panther* newspaper to the list of radical publications circulating in the city.[19] Historian Heather Ann Thompson writes that Detroit was considered one of the most radical cities in the country during the late 1960s, with Black and white dissidents and activists flocking to the city because they believed it

[15] V. Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=308106, p. 68-9.
[16] Ibid, p. 89.
[17] Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 83-90.
[18] Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 10-11.
[19] Ahmad A. Rahman, "Marching Blind: The Rise and Fall of the Black Panther Party in Detroit," in *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

was "ripe for revolution."[20] This is the context in which *Creem* was born in 1969, created by a writer who had been working for one of Detroit's underground publications.

In early issues of *Creem*, the influence of the underground press and counterculture politics was evident. America was spelled with a "k," the police were referred to as "pigs," and rock music was seen as intertwined with radical politics. *Creem's* writers in this period saw their local community as a precious resource, something the collective should fight to protect, and they denounced the entities they deemed a threat to its autonomy. In an editorial on "the Michigan Scene Today," Dave Marsh, DeDay LaRene, and Barry Kramer disparaged Michigan's rock scene as an "oligopoly" that had amassed power in the hands of a few businessmen outside the community and stifled the creativity of what had once been "the most vital music scene in Amerika."[21] *Creem's* coverage of the disastrous Goose Lake Festival held in Jackson, Michigan in the summer of 1970 also registers the magazine's writers' dismay at the fragmentation of the local counterculture community in a moment that some called Michigan's equivalent to Altamont.[22] While no one was killed at the festival, it was remembered for the widespread and open use of hard drugs that for some marked the beginning of the end of Detroit's counterculture as key figures were lost to addiction and prison.[23]

In *Creem's* review of the Goose Lake Festival, Liza Williams denounced the White Panthers in particular for scheduling the event at the same time as the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, which siphoned a potential audience away from Black musicians. "But back in their home

[20] Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001) p. 90-3.
[21] A consequence of this was the precarious fortunes of the iconic venue the Grande Ballroom, which closed and reopened as it shuffled between owners. Dave Marsh, Barry Kramer, and Deday LaRene, "Editorial: The Michigan Scene Today," *Creem*, March 1970, p. 7-10.
[22] Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution*, p. 245-6.
[23] Ibid, p. 260-77.

community of Ann Arbor the real 'people's music,' (historically speaking) the black music, goes its usual low-priced low paying way… I would have thought the White Panthers would have been among the first to support the black musicians," she wrote.[24] *Creem* gave Williams a platform to accuse an ally on the Left of failing one of the movement's progressive goals—supporting Black artists. She extended her criticism to the audience at Goose Lake for choosing to see headliner Rod Stewart rather than the blues artists, thus supporting "the exploitation system that has ripped off the black culture and sold it back to us."[25] Finally, Williams saw the audience at the festival as disconnected from the ethos of the counterculture. "Sadly, most of the people at Goose Lake seemed to mimic the lifestyle alienation of their parents… Their parents watch TV passively; they watch the rock stars in much the same way."[26]

Creem's editors agreed with Williams's assessment. Various articles in this issue identified the ways capitalism had infiltrated the counterculture via music festivals. One accused the musicians themselves of being the problem, "Rock bands…are active participants in the rock industry that exploits youth."[27] The issue concluded with an editorial titled "Festivals Suck" in which *Creem's* editors wrote that participation in rock festivals, "demonstrates our most devastating weaknesses—our gullibility, our shallowness, and our proclivity to be manipulated by mass merchandising moguls, indeed, by mass anything."[28] According to *Creem*, the antidote to these problems was the support of local venues and artists (especially Black artists), as well as a refusal of the corporate system that elevated rock stars as celebrities. Williams ended her

[24] Liza Williams, "A Minimum Security Bash," *Creem*, August 1970, p. 14.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, p. 15.
[27] Tony B. Mambis, "New York Pop Flops," *Creem*, August 1970, p. 20.
[28] The Editors, "An Editorial: Festivals Suck," *Creem*, August 1970, p. 22.

review of Goose Lake by writing, "It was your music; it is your music… Boycott the hype festivals. Support 'unknown' bands who play in your local clubs."[29]

In this countercultural phase *Creem* was willing to cover radical politics outside the context of music as well. *Creem* was one of the few media outlets that covered the Winter Soldier Hearings held in Detroit in late January and early February 1971.[30] These hearings organized by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War were meant to draw attention to the war crimes being committed by American soldiers in Vietnam.[31] Later, the hearings became well-known as footage of the event was made into a documentary and the soldiers' testimony was read into the Congressional Record, and today the Winter Soldier Hearings are considered a pivotal event of the antiwar movement.[32] Other articles on politics *Creem* published in this era include a cover story on "hip capitalism," giving a playful spin on Marx: "Das Hip Kapital," which explored the way media corporations sold the counterculture's cultural productions back to consumers.[33] This issue also included a story about a recent oil spill in San Francisco Bay caused by Standard Oil.[34] These kinds of political articles from perspective of the Left disappeared from the pages of *Creem* after its counterculture period.

Creem's views on sexuality during its counterculture years were markedly more progressive than they became later in the 1970s. During this earlier period, such critics as Dave Marsh wrote about the subversive gender performativity of proto-punk frontmen like Iggy Pop

[29] Ibid.
[30] Nick Medvecky, "Winter Soldier Investigation: 'Brothers and Sisters the Time Has Come to Testify,'" *Creem*, March 1971.
[31] John J. Fitzgerald, "The Winter Soldier Hearings," *Radical History Review*, no. 97 (Winter 2007): 118–22, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2006-017.
[32] Fitzgerald, "The Winter Soldier Hearings," p. 121. In March 2008, Iraq Veterans Against the War organized an event called "Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan" in which over 200 veterans, U.S. active military, and Iraqi and Afghani civilians testified about their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Winter Soldier | Iraq Veterans Against the War," accessed August 2, 2020, https://ivaw.org/wintersoldier.
[33] Craig Karpel, "Das Hip Kapital," *Creem*, March 1971.
[34] Jack Hafferkamp, "San Francisco Bay Oil: The Good the Bad and the Slick," *Creem*, March 1971.

and Rudy "Question Mark" Martinez. In an article on Question Mark and the Mysterians cited as among the first that named punk music, Marsh writes that Question Mark, or ?, wore a "blouse" and "two inch heels" onstage. "But were ? a woman, he could get a job at any go-go joint in the nation. He'd win contests."[35] In an early article on the Stooges, Marsh reported that Iggy Pop cited a gay magazine that discussed the singer, in the form of a conversation between two drag queens affiliated with Andy Warhol's Factory. Marsh writes, "[a] couple of issues ago, *Gay Power* ran an interview between Rita Redd and Jackie Curtis about Iggy, whose lithe bod was featured in a Jaggeresque (Stoogesque?) pose upon the cover. Iggy says it was the best thing he ever saw on himself and I'm hardly in a position to disagree," before reprinting some of the conversation.[36] Here, *Creem* readers received content from a magazine affiliated with the gay liberation movement about a punk artist who saw himself as troubling gender norms.

Creem included the perspective of a gay critic during this earlier period as well. Vince Aletti is another renowned music critic who got his start at *Creem*. When he began writing his "Tighten Up" column and reviewing albums at *Creem* in the early to mid-1970s, he was a rare out gay voice in rock music criticism. An early champion of disco and rap, Aletti could be framed as a "poptimist" before the term had been coined.[37] Aletti's column ran sporadically from 1972 to 1974, sometimes taking the form of best-of-the-year lists in which he praised soul, Motown, and especially Stevie Wonder, and occasional musings on popular culture and LGBT life.

[35] Marsh, "Looney Tunes," May 1971.
[36] Dave Marsh, "The Incredible Story of Iggy & the Stooges," *Creem*, May 1970.
[37] Vince Aletti, *The Disco Files, 1973-78: New York's Underground, Week By Week* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2018); Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 410.

In a 1972 column inspired by Ian Matthews' recording the Crystals's "Da Doo Ron Ron" without altering the gender in the lyrics, performing "[a] man's singing a love song about another man," Aletti addressed the lack of homosexual subject matter in popular song, the stereotypes he felt boxed in by as a gay man (which he called "the straight jacket"), and his desire to self-identify as a "faggot" as a way to evade those stereotypes.[38] This column examined and explained how queer desire was erased from popular music. Aletti discussed how most "faggot-identified" songs (the very few that there were) presented queer love as miserable.[39] The reason for this was, "although there are certainly many gay songwriters and singers there are no songs about homosexual love (unless maybe you want to include everyone's favorite example, 'Lola')."[40] This problem had previously been solved by queer artists singing songs written by or for the opposite gender and not changing the pronouns, as with Matthews's cover of "Da Doo Ron Ron," or by singing from a vague second person. Aletti ended the column by calling for an end to such evasions and for explicit queer representation in music, for "the songs...to come out of the closet too."[41]

In 1973, Aletti discussed the women's and gay movements and fantasized about creating gay vigilante street gangs inspired by the Black and Latinx youth gangs of Brooklyn and the Bronx.[42] Here, Aletti voiced rage at the harassment queer people experience on a constant basis and emphasized the liberatory potential of gender and sexuality-based social movements. "The women's movement, the gay movement have begun to challenge those ideas [of inferiority]… If

[38] Vince Aletti, "Tighten Up," May 1972.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Vince Aletti, "Tighten Up: Have You Seen Your Brother, Baby, Standing in the Shadow?," *Creem*, February 1973.

the idea of faggot gangs isn't totally serious… just thinking about it is liberating."[43] Aletti's column is evidence that in its early years *Creem* featured writing about gender and sexuality in ways that challenged patriarchy and heteronormativity. When Aletti's writing stopped appearing in *Creem*, the magazine's view on homosexuality took a conservative turn.

Even during its counterculture period, *Creem's* portrayals of women were problematic. The name of the magazine itself reflects an aggressive hypermasculinity, and this was emphasized in the artwork for *Creem* created by the underground cartoonist Robert Crumb. In April 1969, Crumb visited *Creem's* office and drew the magazine's logo, a jug smiling and giving the folksy greeting "Boy Howdy!".[44] Crumb also drew a cartoon for the magazine's cover, an "ejaculatory fantasy" featuring an anthropomorphized whipped cream container named "Mr. Dream Whip" spraying whipped cream on the face of a young woman.[45] Barry Kramer "liked the cover so much that he ran it twice" according to Bangs' biographer.[46] This image of a phallic object spewing fluid onto a woman's face illustrates the ideas about gender that were present in the publication from the beginning. Female artists were mostly absent from *Creem* until the mid-1970s. Exclusion of women from the counterculture and New Left was not uncommon during the 1960s, and this exclusion motivated many of the women who went on to create the feminist and women's movements of the following decade.[47]

During *Creem's* counterculture period, the magazine covered local and national Black music frequently. *Creem* writers emphasized that, as fans of a genre influenced by Black music, it was important to materially support Black artists.[48] Detroit blues legend John Lee Hooker

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[43] Ibid.
[44] DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt*, p. 76.
[45] Ibid., p. 77.
[46] The cartoon was the magazine's second cover in 1969, and was run again, in color, in November 1971. Ibid.
[47] Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).
[48] Liza Williams, "A Minimum Security Bash," *Creem*, August 1970.

graced the cover of *Creem* in July 1969, and that issue was dedicated to blues both in Detroit and nationally.[49] In 1971 *Creem* briefly experimented with a recurring feature on Black music called "Black 45s" by Gary Von Tersch and Lee Hildebrand, which they made the questionable decision to illustrate with an image of a hand holding a pistol, but it only ran for a few issues.[50]

Motown artists the Jackson Five and Smokey Robinson appeared on the cover in September 1971 and April 1972 respectively. Motown was a source of pride for Black Detroit, as the label grew into the most successful Black-owned business in the country and created the sounds that defined the 1960s and 1970s for many Americans, Black and white.[51] Despite and even because of its popularity, many music critics accused Motown's sound as being inauthentic, superficial pop fluff.[52] At the beginning of the 1970s, writers at *Creem* bucked that trend and embraced their neighbors at Motown. When Smokey Robinson announced his retirement, *Creem* dedicated the April 1972 issue to him, with Jaan Uhelszki and Vince Aletti penning emotional fan letters describing what the founding member of the Miracles had meant to their lives.[53] In Dave Marsh's review of a Motown Revue show that had recently passed through Detroit, he wrote, echoing Liza Williams' take on Goose Lake, "Somehow it hurts (hurts Smokey? hurts me!) that only 5,000 turned out to see him. One remembers the 15,000 at the same hall a year earlier to see the Rolling Stones, and is not pleased."[54]

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[49] Sheldon Annis, "Blues? In Detroit? You Mean That They Actually Still Play Blues in Detroit?," *Creem*, July 1969.
[50] Gary Von Tersch and Lee Hildebrand, "Black 45's," *Creem*, June 1971, p. 92; Gary Von Tersch and Lee Hildebrand, "Black 45's," *Creem*, March 1971, p. 72; Gary Von Tersch and Lee Hildebrand, "Black 45's," *Creem*, September 1971, p. 68.
[51] Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*., p. 15.
[52] Ibid, p. 124-5. Brian Ward points out how frequent this characterization of Black pop was in music criticism by both Black and white critics. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 141.
[53] Jaan Uhelszki, "An Open Letter to Smokey Robinson," *Creem*, April 1972, p. 33.; Vince Aletti, "Tighten Up," *Creem*, April 1972.
[54] Dave Marsh, "The Motown Variations," *Creem*, September 1971, p. 22.

In this earlier period, *Creem's* critics used writing about Black music to have discussions about race. Vince Aletti reflected on racism in music criticism and the music industry in his letter to Smokey Robinson. Aletti recalled receiving a phone call from "some man from the Daily News" who asked him "do you think Aretha has or will have a great impact on the over-all audience as Bob Dylan for instance has?"[55] After pointing out that what the man meant by "over-all audience" was "white audience," Aletti writes, "I would hate to judge her success as an artist on her acceptance by the Great American Public or its youth contingent. But then it occurred to me that the reverse standard was never applied…Yet the definition of success for Aretha and other black performers is put on white terms."[56] Aletti's best-of-the-year lists, which ran in *Creem* in the early-1970s, presented readers with a critic who saw Black music as the best of popular music. Aletti prefaced his 1972 list by again pointing out the hypocrisy he saw in other music critics when it came to race. "It's strange to me how everyone acknowledged the importance of black music in 1972—it was, for trend-watchers, a Very Big Year for black music—but almost completely ignored it when it came time to listing the year's best music."[57] Aletti's list was composed almost entirely of Black artists; Joni Mitchell was the only white musician on the list in "a year full of exceptional, or at least interesting, albums by women." The top two spots were both taken by Stevie Wonder albums, *Talking Book* and *Music of My Mind*. The following year, Aletti's best-of list included 34 albums and singles.[58] Again, only one white artist makes the list, and again, Stevie Wonder is at the top, this time for his album *Innervisions*.[59] From 1969 to the early 1970s, *Creem's* critics praised Motown, Black pop, and

[55] Vince Aletti, "Tighten Up," *Creem*, April 1972, p. 26.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Vince Aletti, "Tighten Up: Another Top Ten? Yeah, But...," *Creem*, May 1973.
[58] Vince Aletti, "Tighten Up," *Creem*, March 1974.
[59] Ibid.

soul, and wrote about race and music, but these conversations disappeared from *Creem* later in the decade, as did Black music and artists.

Historian John McMillian has examined the rise of the underground press during the 1960s, and argues that the grassroots publications that sprung up like "weeds" or "mushrooms" all over the country were one of the greatest successes of the counterculture and the New Left.[60] Detroit's rich counterculture scene gave birth to many underground papers in the late 1960s, *The Fifth Estate* and *The Inner City Voice* being the most famous examples. *Creem's* engagement with local community, inclusion of queer perspectives, coverage of local and national politics, and emphasis on Black music were all inherited from its roots in the counterculture and the underground press, but these characteristics did not define the publication for long.

Lester Bangs and *Creem's* Mid-Seventies Turn

When Tony Reay started *Creem*, his vision was for a publication focused on Detroit's music scene, but, "*Creem* magazine's importance to Michigan was short lived," Reay told historian David Carson.[61] Due to disagreements with Kramer, Reay left the magazine he founded after the first several issues.[62] Between 1969 and 1972, *Creem* evolved from using the tagline "Creem Magazine is Detroit" to "Michigan's Music Paper" to "The Midwest's Music Magazine" to, finally, "America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine."[63] Kramer's ambition was to make *Creem* a national magazine and the publication slowly stopped covering Detroit music and politics. While some scholars and commentators believe that the magazine retained its Detroit attitude or

[60] John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 31, 189.
[61] Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution,* p. 202-3.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Michael J. Kramer, "'Can't Forget the Motor City': Creem Magazine, Rock Music, Detroit Identity, Mass Consumerism, and the Counterculture," *Michigan Historical Review* 28, no. 2 (2002): 42–77, https://doi.org/10.2307/20173983. p. 61.

sensibility, as the 1970s progressed it covered less local music, participated in white flight, and abandoned the dedication to local community that had been so important to its earlier iteration.[64]

During its counterculture years, *Creem* writers lived and worked out of an industrial loft on Cass Avenue in downtown Detroit.[65] In early 1972, Kramer purchased a farm in the rural suburb of Walled Lake, and the publication followed the many other white-owned businesses that had already fled the inner-city in the wake of the 1967 rebellion. Bangs' biographer describes the move to Walled Lake as having been precipitated by several robberies.[66] The circumstances at the Walled Lake farm, which was thirty miles from the city, were more austere than most of the writers preferred and in 1973 *Creem* again relocated to the posh suburb of Birmingham, the unlikely location where it remained.[67]

Detroit was in the process of becoming a majority Black city during this era and *Creem's* disengagement with the local happens concurrently with an erasure of Black artists from the magazine.[68] During the 1970s, Black Detroiters were becoming more isolated and poorer due to a confluence of deindustrialization, white flight, urban decay, and racial animosity.[69] At the beginning of the decade, they faced one of the most violent police departments in the country, as the STRESS unit of the DPD unleashed a "campaign of terror" on Black Detroiters.[70] Formed in

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[64] Ibid, p. 57.
[65] Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution: The Birth of Detroit Rock "n" Roll*. p. 203.
[66] Jim DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt: The Life & Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), p. 71.
[67] Mike Rubin, "The Wild Story of Creem, Once 'America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine'," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2020, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/arts/music/creem-magazine-documentary.html.
[68] By 1972, Detroit was over 45 percent Black. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, p. 265-6. Between 1970 and 1990, the city's Black population increased from 44.5 percent to 78.4 percent. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, p. 206.
[69] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).
[70] Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City,* p. 81-2, 90-4.; Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 191-202.

January 1971 as a conservative "law and order" response to the 1967 rebellion, the unit was ineffective at reducing Detroit's violent crime and likely exacerbated it, with the city's homicide rate peaking during 1972.[71] None of these issues were covered in *Creem*.

In 1970, the editors wrote, "Detroit is such a unique hotbed of rock 'n' roll… Our bands are people's bands; similarly, we think of ourselves as a people's magazine."[72] By the end of the decade, the sentiment that the magazine should be about or for the people of Detroit was abandoned, and *Creem* paid as little attention to Black music as it did to Detroit's Black citizens. When Motown announced it was leaving Detroit in June 1972, *Creem* said nothing.[73] Chuck Berry and Jimi Hendrix graced the cover in February 1973 and November 1973 respectively, but after Hendrix no other Black artist made the cover of *Creem* for nearly a decade, not until long after the magazine's decline, sale, and move to Los Angeles after Barry Kramer's death.[74] During the mid-1980s, Prince and Michael Jackson were featured on the cover of *Creem*, but by that point the magazine was no longer considered a home for great rock criticism.[75] Although they were fetishized within the magazine's pages, no woman of color was ever on the cover of *Creem*. Dave Marsh told journalist Steve Miller, "When you look at when I left [1973], black music coverage was entirely eliminated. It became all white rock and roll."[76]

The creative freedom offered by *Creem* attracted Lester Bangs early in his career. Bangs relocated from his hometown suburb of San Diego in 1971 and spent five years living in Detroit, writing some of his best-known pieces for the magazine, and mentoring many of *Creem's* other

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[71] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, p. 200
[72] Marsh, Kramer, and LaRene, "Editorial: The Michigan Scene Today."
[73] Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999). p. 239.
[74] Leslie Pielack, "Cocky Colorful Crazy CREEM," *Michigan History Magazine* 99, no. 4 (July 1, 2015).
[75] Prince was on the cover in May 1983, November 1984 (shared), March 1985 (shared), July 1985, and July 1986, Michael Jackson was on the cover in June 1983 and March 1984 (shared), Robert Cray was on the cover in November 1988.
[76] Miller, *Detroit Rock City: The Uncensored History of Rock "n" Roll in America's Loudest City*, p. 75.

writers.[77] Influenced by Beat poetry and New Journalism, Bangs wrote stream-of-consciousness style album reviews and performed interviews in which he wrote of antagonistic interactions with his subjects (including his self-professed idol Lou Reed).[78] In *Creem*, Bangs worked out ideas that helped theorize and define American punk rock. His writing style and aesthetic tastes also came to define *Creem*.[79]

Bangs was a major force in shifting *Creem's* focus away from community engagement and toward viewing rock music as apolitical. In his writing about proto-punk, Bangs elevated nostalgia and noise as primary features of rock music. The louder, more abrasive, and more difficult the listening experience was, the better he liked it. In a 1971 *Creem* article that became his posthumous book's title, "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung," Bangs wrote, "I finally came to realize that grossness was the truest criterion for rock 'n' roll, the cruder the clang and grind, the more fun and longer listened-to the album'd be."[80] Bangs' vision of rock and roll authenticity was found in the garage rock of the early 1960s made by artists unaffiliated with the social movements of that decade, bands that often had a rudimentary grasp of how to play their instruments and wrote songs about lust and teen angst. The article reads as an exercise in nostalgia, as Bangs imagines himself reciting a monologue about a rosy past to unnamed youngsters. "Now let me set my old brain a ruminatin', ah, what upbuilding tale from days of

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[77] Jim DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt: The Life & Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic*, p. 71, 207.
[78] Lester Bangs, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Death Dwarves, or How I Slugged It Out with Lou Reed and Stayed Awake," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburator Dung: Rock "n" Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 169–83.
[79] Readers noticed how popular Bangs had become as he repeatedly won "favorite critic" in the magazine's year-end poll. "The 1972 Creem Rock 'n' Roll Reader's Poll Results," *Creem*, June 1973, p. 44; "The 1973 Creem Rock 'n' Roll Readers' Poll," *Creem*, May 1974, p. 46; "The Official 1974 Creem Reader's Poll Results," *Creem*, April 1975, p. 40.; One letter-writer diagnosed the magazine's critics with "Bangsitosis—a malady which exclusively attacks writers of the wasted persuasion. It stems from eating cold pizza and smoking cheap dope. Early symptoms include typing in the dark and dancing to Iggy Pop records." Laura, "An ounce of Prevention," *Creem*, December 1977.
[80] Lester Bangs, "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: A Tale of These Times," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: Rock "n" Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 5-19, p. 10.

yore shall I relate today?" he begins.[81] Bangs points to the politicization of rock music in the late 1960s as the moment "precisely where things started to go downhill" and the genre became corrupted.[82]

> Instead of singing about taking tea with Mary Jane and boppin' yer dingus on ol' Sweet Slit Annie it was Help me God I don't know the meaning of life or I believe that love is gonna cure the world of psoriasis and cancer both and I'm gonna tell the people all about it 285 different ways whether you like it or not. And Why is there war well go ask the children they know everything we need to know, and Gee I sure like black folks even if my own folks don't and endless vinyl floods of drivel in similar veins.[83]

For Bangs, music with a political message condescended to its audience and strayed from the emotional core of rock and roll, which was found in songs about sex, drugs, and the male adolescent experience. In order to find good rock and roll, one had to look to the time before "things started to go downhill" due to the politics of the counterculture, Black Power, and the New Left.

In articles like "Psychotic Reactions" and "James Taylor Marked for Death," Bangs looked to the past to find his vision of authentic rock and roll, but he found it in the present while living in Detroit. In a 1971 article on the Stooges, he writes that the band's music was "what rock and roll at heart is and always has been, beneath the stylistic distortions the last few years have wrought. The Stooges are… beautifully bopping, manic, simplistic jive."[84] Bangs wrote that the Stooges epitomized the fact that "rock is basically an adolescent music," and mocked music that

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[81] Ibid., p. 5.
[82] Ibid., p. 9.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Lester Bangs, "Of Pop and Pies and Fun: A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review, or, Who's the Fool?," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Critic: Rock "n" Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 31–52. p. 32.

attempted to spread New Left politics.[85] Bangs praised Iggy Pop for many things in this piece, but the play with gender performativity that was highlighted in Dave Marsh's earlier profile of the band was not one of them. In the Stooges, Bangs found a contemporary group that enacted the tenants of rock authenticity he explored in his writing about obscure bands from the previous decade.

For Bangs, the social movements of the 1960s had resulted in rock music becoming oversaturated with musical excess, cults of celebrity, and songs that preached to a passive audience. Bangs' disgust towards the counterculture, the New Left, and what they had done to rock and roll animated his idealized vision of the past before those movements took shape, a past in which bands like the Count Five played rock music that had not been ruined by politics. At this same moment, the New Right leveraged nostalgia to offer the Americans who also felt disgusted by the social changes of the 1960s a promise to return to the way things were.[86] While Bangs did not consider himself conservative, his longing for a world without the counterculture and the New Left in some ways mirrored the vision of America the New Right used to create a new coalition in the 1970s, and his writing moved *Creem* in a more conservative direction.

Gender and sexuality were critical aspects of the nostalgia offered by both the New Right and the rock critics of *Creem*. These writers' nostalgia worked to create what Robert Walser has called an "exscription" of women from rock music.[87] If there were few visible female rock musicians in the 1970s, there were even fewer in the 1960s, and none in the idealized pasts that these writers constructed. As the New Right's "breadwinner conservativism" promised to return

[85] "in fact all Marxists are due for some pies in pronto priority, but to wit on all that bread singin' bout bein' an outlaw when yer most scurrilous illegal set is ripping off lyrics from poor old A.A. Milne…" Ibid, p. 45, 37.
[86] Robert O. Self, "Part 4: Family Values, 1973-2011," in *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 309–98.
[87] Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, 2014th ed. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 114.

women to traditional gender roles, save the American family, and stop LGBTQ people from gaining civil rights, the rock criticism in *Creem* increasingly dehumanized queer people and women.[88]

Bangs' writing reveals anxieties about gender and sexuality that influenced how the magazine approached these topics as the 1970s progressed. In an article on David Bowie, Bangs wrote, "Everybody knows that faggots don't like music like David Bowie and the [New York] Dolls—that's for teenagers and pathophiles. Faggots like musical comedies and soul music."[89] In another piece, he referred to Lou Reed's transgender partner, Rachel, as "the Thing." Using the pronoun "it," Bangs pauses in his interview to discuss his feelings about "the bearded lady," writing, "It was grotesque. Not only grotesque, it was abject."[90] In these pieces, Bangs reifies his masculinity by excluding queer people from participation in rock music and denigrating them as not only having bad taste, but not even being human. These articles made it safe for heterosexual men to listen to artists like Lou Reed, David Bowie, and the New York Dolls without risking their masculinity, as Bangs insisted these artists did not have queer fans despite their play with gender performativity.

While much of Bangs' writing was characterized by these problematic views on gender and sexuality, not all of it was. Bangs praised unconventional female musicians like Patti Smith, something that would not be seen in *Creem* in the later part of the decade. In his review of Smith's album *Horses*, Bangs emphasized her importance as a role model to other female artists and women in general. "For one thing, she has certain qualities that can make her a hero to a

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[88] Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*. p. 10.
[89] Lester Bangs, "Johnny Ray's Better Whirlpool," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: Rock "n" Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 146–50. p. 146.
[90] Lester Bangs, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Death Dwarves, or How I Slugged It Out with Lou Reed and Stayed Awake," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburator Dung: Rock "n" Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 169–83. p. 174.

whole generation of young girls… Suffice to say that Patti has done more here for woman as aggressor than all the Liberations tracts published."[91] According to his biographer, Bangs "championed" Jaan Uhelszki's promotion to editor, which made her one of the first female editors of a music magazine.[92] Bangs even wrote an article for the feminist publication *Ms. Magazine* attacking "cock rock" and calling for "an all-woman rock 'n' roll band that can create the kind of loud, savage, mesmerizing music that challenges men on their own ground."[93] These more nuanced aspects of Bangs' work would not characterize the influence he left at the magazine.

Bangs demonstrated racial biases that similarly affected his music criticism and *Creem*. His favorite rock and roll was almost all white. He granted Black artists credit as an anonymous collective for influencing rock as a genre, but the majority of the artists he championed were white and male. In "James Taylor Marked for Death," Bangs wrote that the only thing blues was good for was influencing rock music, "it is amazing the consistency with which certain lines and ideas… will disappear into the cheap whiskey hotel rooms of the old blues South… only to turn up years late in some song by a punko English rock group who quite possibly (at least I damn fucking well hope so) never heard of Lightnin' Hopkins."[94] Bangs' ideal rock musicians were so far removed from Black music that they were influenced by it subconsciously, but did not actually listen to it. Bangs used racial slurs often in his writing for *Creem*, with the intention of imitating his heroes such as the Beat poets and Lenny Bruce.[95] He later admitted in the 1979 *Village Voice* article "The White Noise Supremacists" that he regretted using that language.

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[91] Lester Bangs, "Stagger Lee Was a Woman," *Creem*, February 1976.
[92] DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt*, p. 79.
[93] Lester Bangs, "Women in Rock: They Won't Get Fooled Again," *Ms. Magazine*, August 1972.
[94] Lester Bangs, "James Taylor Marked for Death," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 53–81. p. 61.
[95] DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt: The Life & Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic*, p. 98

Reflecting on his racist behavior and writing during the years he lived in Detroit, he wrote, "It took years before I realized what an asshole I'd been."[96] Unfortunately, Bangs' earlier views on race and music influenced *Creem* as did his gender politics. In a 1976 review of the Ramones' debut album, critic Gene Sculatti praises the band for their whiteness. "Proficiency, poetry, taste, Art have nothing to do with the Ramones. Nor do blues, improvisatory solos or pedal steel. White, American rock 'n' roll is what they practice," Sculatti wrote.[97] This was *Creem's* perspective on race and rock music moving into the latter half of the decade.

During the first few years of the 1970s, *Creem* fled the city of Detroit, shifted its focus from local to national, and stopped covering Black music. Guided by Barry Kramer's ambition to become a national magazine and Bangs' theories about rock and roll authenticity, by the period between 1973 and 1974, *Creem* had become a more conservative publication than during its counterculture period. Lester Bangs' presence as a writer and editor shaped the style and politics of *Creem*, so that the writers who wrote for it and the fans who read it favored a white, masculine, apolitical vision of rock music. This conservative vision of rock in *Creem* would become more extreme towards the end of the decade.

Creem Post-Lester Bangs

Articles like "White Noise Supremacists" showed that Bangs could learn from past mistakes and that he later adopted a more progressive outlook, but the rock critics influenced by his writing imitated his earlier style and political views.[98] Bangs' biographer Jim DeRogatis writes that after Bangs left Detroit for New York, "Editors Susan Whitall and Billy Altman published many of the writers Lester had mentored, while the core of the staff…grew up reading

[96] Lester Bangs, "The White Noise Supremacists," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: Rock "n" Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock "n" Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 274–82. p. 276.
[97] Gene Sculatti, "Punk Rock Rises Again!! Ramones," *Creem*, August 1976.
[98] Bangs, "The White Noise Supremacists."

Lester's *Creem* as if it were the Bible" and writer Rick Johnson was even dubbed "the new Lester."[99] Influenced by Bangs, *Creem* rebelled against the political activism and idealism of the counterculture that birthed it. A consequence of this rebellion was a shift to the Right. In the latter half of the 1970s, writing in *Creem* increasingly mirrored the ideological extremes of the New Right.

Historians have argued the realm of gender and sexuality was perhaps the most emotional and divisive battleground for the political realignment of the 1970s.[100] This was true at *Creem*. While Black artists disappeared from the magazine, women were included more often, but with their inclusion came humiliation. The first woman to appear on the cover of *Creem* was Grace Slick in December 1977. Other female artists who appeared frequently in the magazine in the late 1970s and early 1980s include Debbie Harry, Stevie Nicks, Joan Jett, and Linda Ronstadt.[101] Female artists in *Creem* were sexualized and their musical talent was degraded. *Creem* was explicit in its belief that the women it included were inferior artists when compared with the men the magazine covered.

An example of this is seen in *Creem*'s parody of a feminist issue. In May 1980, the magazine put Debbie Harry on the cover and advertised a "special report" on "the future of women in rock."[102] The article focused more on clothing than music in the brief "history" it

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[99] DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt,* p. 207.
[100] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[101] Stevie Nicks was on the cover in March 1978 (shared) and February 1983 (with Fleetwood Mac); Debbie Harry was on the cover in March 1979 (shared), June 1979, February 1980, March 1980 (shared), May 1980, June 1981, August 1982; Linda Ronstadt shared the cover with Debbie Harry in March 1979; Pat Benatar was on the cover in March 1981 (shared), November 1981, and March 1983 (shared); Joan Jett was on the cover in June 1982 and July 1983 (shared); Chrissie Hynde in March 1981 (shared) and August 1984; Cyndie Lauper (shared) in April 1987; Madonna in May 1985 (included in a feature on "Biggest Bozos of the 80s"), August 1985 (headline "Inside Madonna…In a Manner of Speaking"), and June 1988.
[102] Susan Whitall, Dave DiMartino, and Mark J. Norton, "Women in Revolt!: Real Men Shiver While Eve Trashes the 80's," *Creem*, May 1980.

provides of women in rock. Most of the piece is spent humiliating female artists, speculating about their sex lives, and relating their sex appeal (or lack thereof) to their success in the music industry. Dean DiMartino writes that Grace Slick "has a history of exposing her private parts," that "Cher still manages to be relevant in the 80's, as does the size of her breasts," and that Nancy Sinatra is "Essentially a wheezo, Frankie's spawn deserves a special mention for her interest in fine leathers."[103] Susan Whitall contributed to this article and was the editor of this issue, but her presence did not result in a quality article about the state of women in rock music in 1980.

While *Creem's* coverage of female artists was lacking, the publication itself was a platform for female rock critics, and as the decade progressed it employed more women as writers, photographers, and in leadership roles. Towards the end of the 1970s, *Creem* published issues in which the masthead was almost all women, a rarity in the male-dominated world of music criticism even today. Critics like Susan Whitall and Jaan Uhelszki were pioneers in the genre, and *Creem* gave them a space to practice their craft. Uhelszki was the magazine's first female editor, and Whitall later followed. Evelyn McDonnell's "secret history" of women in rock journalism draws attention to *Creem* for being "a hotbed of journalistic styles, providing a home for… a number of female critics: Robbie Cruger, Jaan Uhelszki, Georgia Christgau (Robert's sister), Patti Smith, and Lisa Robinson, among others."[104] The publication's irreverence made it willing to embrace content that competitors like *Rolling Stone* and the *Village Voice* might have rejected, such as Lisa Robinson's long-running "Eleganza" society

[103] Ibid.
[104] Evelyn McDonnell, "The Feminine Critique: The Secret History of Women and Rock Journalism," in *Rock She Wrote* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995). p. 9.

column.[105] Whitall worked at *Creem* from 1975 to 1983, and was one of the magazine's leaders after Bangs left in 1977. The 1970s were an era marked by both progress for women's rights and resistance to feminism and the women's movement.[106] The female writers who worked at *Creem* both suffered from and participated in misogyny while making rock journalism more equitable by adding their voices to a sea of male opinions, and they disagree with each other on the role sexism played in their work lives.[107] *Creem* illustrates that including women in rock criticism did not solve rock criticism's problems with patriarchy.

Simon Frith argues that rock critics are responsible for "not just producing a version of the music for the reader but also a version of the listener for the music."[108] In *Creem's* "Mail" section, this theory is seen in process as the magazine's editors curated conversations between fans. During the latter half of the 1970s, the letters to the editor page devolved into a minefield of homophobia and sexism, some of which centered around turf wars between fans of punk and heavy metal. In the "Mail" section, *Creem* had published the strangest and funniest letters from its readers since its early days. By the late-1970s, the magazine used fan letters to cultivate a particular masculine sensibility among rock fans, shared even by ones who loathed each other's musical tastes. Letters accusing musicians, *Creem* staff, and previous letter-writers of femininity, homosexuality, or non-normative gender traits were frequently published. By giving these

[105] McDonnell writes that Robinson's work "brought a perspective to the field that in many ways is an antidote to rock criticism's tendency to get hung up in the netherworld of album reviews." Ibid, p. 11.
[106] Self, "Part 4: Family Values, 1973-2011."
[107] Robbie Cruger told Bangs' biographer Jim DeRogatis, "When you're looking at that era, men definitely used the burgeoning feminism as an excuse to get whatever they wanted…There was a double standard, but there was lip service being given to feminism." Jaan Uhelszki told DeRogatis, "I always disagreed with Robbie about sexism at *Creem*. I've always used my sex to my advantage. Otherwise it's just a rationale for failure." DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt*, p. 79.
[108] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 68.

opinions a public platform, the magazine endorsed this rhetoric and operated as a space in which readers could reify their masculinity by denigrating women and queer people.

In *Creem's* "Mail" section, fans imitated the outrageous style of the magazine's most famous writers, and the editors published the most extreme comments they received. A 1980 debate between fans of punk and heavy metal included the following poem, "Punk rockers receive good head / From the bloody fuckers that listen to Led…"[109] Another issue included a voice from the opposite side of the argument, disparaging punk fans and "their ridiculous letters praising faggots like Iggy Pop, Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, and so on. A bunch of talentless fags who mean nothing to Rock and never will."[110] In these letters the magazine's readers echoed the gender politics of *Creem's* critics as they used heteronormativity and masculinity to define rock music. The editors occasionally printed letters that objected to this homophobic rhetoric, but these kinds of responses were rarely published and so the voices of readers who took issue with these conversations were marginalized.[111]

When *Creem* began, one of its priorities was to distinguish itself from that other rock and roll magazine. "We do not want to be another *Rolling Stone*," wrote editors Dave Marsh, Barry Kramer, and Deday LaRene in March 1970.[112] In its early days, Jann Wenner's publication posed as an underground newspaper, adopting the underground press' aesthetics while eschewing the Left's politics. *Rolling Stone* was enamored with celebrity, not with artists but with rock stars, from its inception in 1967, and Jann Wenner had always viewed the New Left

[109] B. Lee, "Robert Frost Plagiarized!!," *Creem*, June 1980.
[110] Real Rock Fan, "No More Talentless Whimps!!," *Creem*, May 1980.
[111] Oudia Montague from Tuscon wrote, "And why are you so threatened by gays? Do you think it's contagious?... Actually if you only KNEW how many people around you are quietly gay…" Ouida Montague, "What About the Mazola?," *Creem*, July 1980.
[112] Dave Marsh, Barry Kramer, and Deday LaRene, "Editorial: The Michigan Scene Today," *Creem*, March 1970.

with contempt.[113] *Creem*, in contrast, had radical credibility. During its counterculture period *Creem* supported the radical groups and movements of Detroit. However, by the late 1970s, *Creem* aspired to be more like its foil as it embraced consumerism and celebrity culture. According to critic Dave Marsh, who wrote for *Creem* from the beginning, "Barry wanted to be Jann Wenner."[114] By the 1970s, Wenner had worked to elevate his preferred musicians into rock stars and built a cult of celebrity around them that was mutually beneficial, making all involved very wealthy. Wenner and *Rolling Stone* were so influential that these priorities changed rock and roll and youth culture during the 1970s, and this influence can be seen in *Creem*.[115]

While in 1969 *Creem's* writers called for readers to reject the rock star, during the latter half of the 1970s, the magazine became enamored with celebrities, wealth, and consumption. In November 1974, *Creem* began running a feature called "Creem Mate of the Month," which consisted of a sexy photo of a musician with a short, humorous caption.[116] "Creem Mates" ran sporadically through the 1970s, and eventually the title changed to "The Creem Dreem." *Creem* used both men and women for these profiles, which were about sex appeal and personality rather than music. While Chaka Khan and Tina Turner were both "Creem Mates," no woman of color was ever on the cover of *Creem*.[117] In the paragraphs accompanying the "Creem Mate of the

[113] Referring to an incident early in Wenner's career, his biographer Joe Hagan writes, "Ever since he snuck out of the Sheraton-Palace Hotel sit-in of 1964 to avoid a beating by police, his relationship to radical politics had been a cautious one." Joe Hagan, *Sticky Fingers: The Life and Times of Jann Wenner and Rolling Stone Magazine* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017). p. 148. Wenner criticized Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies repeatedly in *Rolling Stone*, and often said that he hated hippies and the counterculture. Hagan quotes an interview from 1979 in which Wenner said: "'I've been bourgeois forever. Rolling Stone is bourgeois. Its readers are bourgeois. All this counterculture, hippie stuff is—' Wenner spits out an obscenity." Ibid, p. 254-5, 377.

[114] Steve Miller, *Detroit Rock City: The Uncensored History of Rock "n" Roll in America's Loudest City* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013), p. 72.

[115] Hagan writes, "Wenner was, in effect, reframing rock and roll as a celebrity culture like any before it. It wasn't a movement, or a youth culture anymore, let alone a revolution." Ibid, p. 228.

[116] "Creem Mate of the Month: Todd Rundgren," *Creem*, November 1974.

[117] Eric Meola, "Creem Mate of the Month: Chaka Khan," *Creem*, June 1975; Barry Levine, "Creemmate of the Month: Tina Turner," *Creem*, January 1976.

Month" and "Creem Dreem" articles, *Creem* sexualized and belittled female artists.[118] In 1975, *Creem* introduced a running feature called "Stars Cars!" in which the magazine printed a poster of a rock star posing with their favorite vehicle each month.[119] The poster format further encouraged fans to venerate the wealth and lifestyle of rock stars, as *Creem* suggested they pull the image from the magazine and attach it to a wall in their home. This feature continued through the end of the decade and included luxury vehicles owned by Ted Nugent, Alice Cooper, and David Lee Roth among others.[120] In 1976, the magazine began a feature called "Backstage: Where Stars Tank Up & Let Their Images Down."[121] Veering into tabloid territory, this feature was a photo collage of candid shots of rock stars and celebrities accompanied by satirical captions. As they appeared in the magazine during the 1970s, recurring features like "Backstage," "Star's Cars," and "Creem Mate"/"Creem Dreem" show the continued erosion of progressive politics in *Creem* as the decade progressed.

This glorification of wealth and consumption mirrors another aspect of 1970s political realignment, as conservative politicians and economists created an idealized fantasy of the free market in order to deregulate the economy for the benefit of the rich.[122] In a decade characterized by economic instability, *Creem* shifted from questioning capitalism and asking its readers to support local musicians, to selling them images of rock stars' excess. While Barry Kramer never became as wealthy or as influential as Jann Wenner, *Creem* came to mirror *Rolling Stone's*

[118] When Ruby Starr was featured, the magazine suggested that male fans had only purchased Starr's record in order to look at explicit photos of her "and thrown the record away," and now that *Creem* had published such a photo there was no reason to buy her album. Neil Zlozower, "The Creem Dreem: Ruby Starr," *Creem*, November 1975.
[119] Kate Simon, "Star's Cars No. 1: Rod Stewart," *Creem*, February 1975.
[120] Ron Pownall, "Stars Cars No. 47: Ted Nugent," *Creem*, March 1979; Steve Reyes, "Stars Cars No. 43: Alice Cooper," *Creem*, November 1978; Richard Creamer, "Stars Cars No. 50: David Lee Roth of Van Halen," *Creem*, August 1979.
[121] "Backstage: Where the Stars Tank Up & Let Their Images Down," *Creem*, September 1976.
[122] Daniel T. Rodgers, "The Rediscovery of the Market," in *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 41–76.

emphasis on celebrity and consumption. And while *Creem* folded in 1989, *Rolling Stone* continued to depend on celebrity culture. In 2000, Wenner purchased the magazine *US Weekly,* and by the middle of that decade profits from the tabloid were what kept his lavish lifestyle afloat.[123]

Conclusion: Another 1970s Declension Narrative

Like many underground magazines, *Creem* did not publish its subscription numbers. Estimates are that it had between one hundred and two hundred thousand subscribers across the country at its peak, with subscriptions dropping by half by the end of the 1970s at which point it had become "almost a parody of itself."[124] Bangs acrimoniously left Detroit and *Creem* for New York City in 1976, and *Creem's* founder Barry Kramer died of an accidental overdose in January 1981.[125] Bangs also died from an accidental overdose the following year.[126] After Kramer's death, changes in content and personnel were made to keep the publication afloat. The magazine was sold to pay off Kramer's debts in 1985 and relocated to Los Angeles in 1987. A victim of poor management and the bleak landscape of journalism under neoliberal economics, the final issue of *Creem* was published in 1989.[127]

While the magazine was sputtering out by the beginning of the 1980s, its ideal of popular music was on the ascent. "Bangs's vision was flawed but powerful" and it helped ensure that rock music would remain white and male for decades to come.[128] Historians often write about the

[123] Hagan, *Sticky Fingers*, p. 469-484.
[124] Jim DeRogatis, *Let It Blurt: The Life & Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic*, p. 207; Michael J. Kramer, "'Can't Forget the Motor City': Creem Magazine, Rock Music, Detroit Identity, Mass Consumerism, and the Counterculture,", p. 46; Leslie Pielack, "Cocky Colorful Crazy CREEM," *Michigan History Magazine* 99, no. 4 (July 1, 2015). Bangs's biographer DeRogatis writes that "circulation hovered around two hundred thousand" and Kramer writes that at its height *Creem* "reach[ed] a circulation of more than one hundred thousand."
[125] DeRogatis, *Let it Blurt*, p. 127-129.
[126] Ibid. p. 234.
[127] Leslie Pielack, "Cocky Colorful Crazy CREEM," *Michigan History Magazine* 99, no. 4 (July 1, 2015).
[128] Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, p. 57.

1970s using a declension narrative, and in this way *Creem's* journey reflects the decade as well.[129] *Creem* lost Lester Bangs, its readers, and its Detroit home. America lost the promise of the 1960s social movements, the protections of organized labor, the gains of the New Deal, and even the will to care about each other, swapping empathy for the indulgent narcissism of what Tom Wolfe famously called the "Me Decade."[130] In Detroit, deindustrialization, the fall of labor, and white flight were particularly extreme, rendering Black Detroiters poorer and more segregated by the 1970s and 1980s than they had ever been before.[131]

Historian Heather Thompson argues that reading Detroit, and urban America more broadly, of the 1970s and 1980s using this declension narrative does not tell the complete story. "The racially conservative whites who chose to abandon the inner cities and vote for Ronald Reagan in 1980 did so as losers, not victors," she writes.[132] The cities of urban America were and would continue to be politically influential, one of the last remaining sites of liberal and radical politics in the country. A declension narrative focused on deindustrialization and white backlash misses that "black-led liberal cities house the few remaining American institutions committed to economic and racial equality."[133]

Writers and musicians have portrayed Detroit's music scene using declension narratives as well, arguing that everything good about music in Detroit ended with the MC5, or the

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[129] Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*; Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015); Paul Sabin, "Environmental Law and the End of the New Deal Order," *Law and History Review* 33, no. 4 (November 2015): 965–1003, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248015000462.
[130] Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1976, https://nymag.com/news/features/45938/.
[131] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. p. 269.
[132] Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*. p. 219.
[133] Ibid, p. 220.

Stooges, or Goose Lake, or Motown leaving Detroit.[134] Meanwhile, bands from Detroit kept making music, and fans and friends were interested enough to start their own publications about their scene. In the wake of *Creem's* commercialization and nationalization, zines like Jerry Vile's *White Noise* and Tesco Vee's *Touch and Go* covered Detroit and Michigan's post-punk and hardcore scenes with a grassroots perspective.[135] *Touch and Go* expanded into an influential hardcore label, helping to foster an active hardcore scene in Michigan through the 1980s. Detroit's rock scene had another nationally recognized renaissance during the late 1990s and early 2000s with the "garage rock" of bands like the White Stripes and the Von Bondies.[136] The city also produced hip-hop pioneers including Awesome Dre, Eminem, and J Dilla, and is often cited as being the birthplace of techno.[137]

Another declension narrative: according to historian John McMillian, *Creem's* evolution was not unique. During the 1970s, many underground newspapers transitioned into alternative newspapers: "Although the crusading and rabble-rousing sentiments that colored the underground papers were not lost completely, henceforth they would be tempered and muted."[138] These papers were on the Left to varying extents, but "they didn't see themselves as appendages

[134] Miller, *Detroit Rock City,* p. 105; Carson, *Grit, Noise, and Revolution,* p. 274-277.; Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985) p. 189.
[135] Tesco Vee and Dave Stimson, *Touch and Go: The Complete Hardcore Punk Zine '79-'83*, ed. Steve Miller (Brooklyn, New York: Bazillion Points, 2010); Robert St Mary, *The Orbit Magazine Anthology: Re-Entry* (Detroit: Painted Turtle, 2015).
[136] Miller, *Detroit Rock City*, p. 257-288, 297-302.
[137] M.L. Liebler, ed., "Hip-Hop, Ghettotech, Donuts, and Techno Dreams," in *Heaven Was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond* (Detroit: Painted Turtle, 2016), 346–88; Dan Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
[138] McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters*, p. 173.

to a social movement."[139] Detroit's alt weekly, *The Detroit Metro Times*, has been in operation since 1980.[140]

But, there is a counternarrative. While *Creem* abandoned the ethos that inspired its start, the publication it came from remained true to its ideals. *The Fifth Estate* is one of the longest-running radical publications in North America, and has continued to publish radical and anarchist content, operating mostly out of Detroit, since 1965.[141]

[139] Ibid.
[140] "About Metro Times," Detroit Metro Times, accessed June 12, 2020, https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/AboutMetroTimes/Page.
[141] David Watson, "Notes toward a History of the Fifth Estate," *The Fifth Estate*, Spring-Summer 2005, https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/368-369-spring-summer-2005/notes-toward-history-fifth-estate/.