

## Regarding music and media

July 2004

By Mats Johansson

**The interplay between music and media has never been more apparent than today. Mats Johansson and Thomas Olsson discuss the situation from their respective points of view.**

I started playing in a band in 1974 (I have been a member of IB since 1977), and during the 30 years that have passed, the development within music has been tremendous within composition, interpretation and the technical side of things. Needless to say, I am grateful for having been able to experience these changes, but I nevertheless sometimes miss the spotlight on music itself that was prevalent during the 1970's.

What I really enjoyed then was the discussions with members of the audience after the shows. People were open-minded and many asked about IB's way of thinking about music. You could find yourself going into deep and strange discussions. Such were the times, everything seemed possible. The situation is different today.

The music industry was rarely discussed in those days. Today, media – mostly the rags and commercially financed radio and TV – have become the right hand of the music industry (previously they had been the left hand), and the result is a sewer emission of music without substance.

Let me stress that I am not a reactionary person, but the circumstances have led to a situation where too few composers and musicians within popular music control their own music the way they should. This in turn affects the listener who will have problems defending him- or herself against the strategies of the media industry to use their power to manipulate our freedom of choice.

Unfortunately, most of the money generated from the music industry today goes to non-musicians, and regrettably I think this is only the beginning.

Something is terribly wrong when big music events need the media to support them by writing column after column of what are essentially advertisements for these events. The newspapers gain by selling copies, of course. The collaborations between media companies and the music business deepen and turn into an amorous relationship where the music journalist acts as coordinator for his superiors.

When I have tried to present these arguments, the media representatives have labelled me a jealous, bitter and rabid plotter. I would describe myself in a different way: Fit as a fiddle pointing my finger at a growing dependency problem within an area that journalists ought to prioritize from their integrity perspective which they are always harping on about.

Divorces occur, but since very few companies control and fix the market, it is the same deck of cards that is being shuffled over and over again. Perhaps you should at least cut the deck occasionally?

The words “medially interesting” in connection with musical experiences are a qualified truth. It seems to me that reviews that deal with music are a thing of the past. Instead, you tend to find reflections on the artist's jacket, haircut, weight, looks, economy etc., frequently with irrelevant ponderings on the nostalgic adventures of the reviewer's younger days.

The review is sometimes accompanied by a photo of the reviewer but not the artist, a paradox considering what the review is supposed to be dealing with.

IB have not suffered much of this kind of so-called journalism. This is probably because we have never moved in the musical circles where these things happen, and we are grateful for it. Our music is still the centre of our attention. But we have learned

how to play the advertising department against the entertainment editors on the newspapers, pointing out that we won't advertise unless the paper does a good job promoting the concert before and writing about it afterwards.

The responsibility of dealing with this promotional work is something we tend to leave with the advertising department of the newspapers for dealing with within the company. That's good customer relations.

If the project is big enough, there is never trouble, if you only have patience and do not criticize the parts involved, because if you do, the whole situation can come back at you harder and faster than you would like it to and cause great pains for you.

A hurt music journalist is one of the most fierce and dangerous a musician can come up against. The punishment frequently lasts for life.

Sweden is in no way a good country for musical journalism, and we will never have a Sinatra, Presley, Zappa or Joplin. We will have to make do with "Snoddas" [a sportsperson who recorded the odd novelty record in the 1950's]. Swedish media will make sure!

A friend of mine told me that a certain type of Indian music has to survive for three generations before it can be performed publicly. In our musical sphere, dominated by Top 40-music, even three weeks seems like a long time. What if these ideas were applicable to the environment, cars or paintings?

Music is a nature phenomenon in constant flux, but I am pessimistic about man's ability to preserve the magical power of music in a decent way. The media industry has a great responsibility at a time when music is consumed in a multitude of ways, previously unheard of.

PS. I would like to estimate my term of punishment as distained upon me by Media Inc.: 3-5 years of total silence, unconditional withdrawal, knives in the back, and after that

a place in an institution through articles by the odd substitute reporter. I hope that the children and grandchildren of the journalists will pardon me and let my creative thoughts run free.

## **Regarding music and media:**

### **The response**

**by Thomas Olsson, musicologist**

Ever since people started reviewing music regularly in the early 19th century, tensions between musicians and composers on the one hand and music critics (or media in general) on the other hand have always been present.

One has to bear in mind that the music critic is always a person. He/she will inevitably experience bad days (espresso machine broken, traffic jams, separations) and good days (pay rise, sunny days, separations), and even though – in an ideal world – these things should not affect a review, the facts of life tend to shape the finished work of the music critic.

This is to defend and explain the daily work of a person writing about music. The same could be said about the musician or the composer. Or anybody.

Let's also remember that the commercialization of musical life – if we are to take an extreme view of the word commercial – started the very day someone decided to charge people for performing publicly. The selling of sheet music, recordings, LPs, CDs and DVDs is a commercial act, and therefore any music that is sold in any way can be regarded as commercial. In theory at least. In practice, things look slightly differently. Jazz, which is nowadays regarded as a narrow field of music, was once accused for being

commercial.

Rossini was looked down upon in the early 19th century for being populist, now people dress up to go to the opera houses around the world to listen to his works.

Most, if not all, of the transformations from low status to high status (or high to low as it were) has occurred through the mediation of media (and politics).

The whole rock music industry – including people who are regarded as renegades such as Dylan, The Clash and Neil Young – is based on commercial availability.

Since the fifties, recording companies, radio, newspapers and TV have been a necessary part in the development of rock. In other words: no media, no rock history as we know it today.

When Mats writes about being able to discuss music with the audience in the 70's, he is right, but this still happens with Isildurs Bane.

In Verviers, Klas had a learned discussion with a member of the audience about Stockhausen's percussion music. Similar situations occur all the time, wherever IB perform. I am convinced that this is largely due to the fact that IB's fans are actually interested in music. This is one of the reasons for us recommending music that we think may interest you in our newsletters.

Now onto the other side. The music critics. When I talk to people about music reviews and music critics, the response I generally get is more or less the same: lack of trust and lack of interest.

The only exception being owners of record shops and record company sales people i.e. people who are part of the music industry.

Even though I was too young to analyse the music business and its relationship to media in the 60's and 70's, from what I have gathered from reading on the subject, I think Mats is mostly right. But remember that there was another side of music in those days too. Musicians suffered from being ripped of

by managers, had to perform under lousy circumstances and were cheated by record companies then too.

And when the 70's came around, many journalists writing about rock music had their political sympathies to the left, and this was reflected in the media. The leftist ideology that was an important part of the music business at the time does not advocate commercialism (please see above for the problems with the word commercial).

When the music and media industries went global during the 80's, things had changed. Ideology went out of the window and the results can be seen today, when music has found new channels, some good and some bad. You can surely find several examples yourself. If you want to read about the dirty side of the music business, read Fredric Dannen's book *The Hit Men*.

A difference from the 50's, 60's and 70's is the introduction of what the American sociologist George Ritzer named McDonaldization of society. This basically means that a number of social organizations in society – the music industry for example – are being organized along lines similar to the infamous McDonald's company.

The main dimensions of this new part of the music industry are: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. In a recent interview in *The Independent*, Peter Hammill said much the same thing: "The music world has gone IKEA – one size. And I'm a bespoke furniture-maker. Not selling many, and only to people who find me."

There are further problems with media apart from McDonaldization, I find. A very big problem is that for some reason, anyone with an interest in music – provided he or she has the right connections – can write about and have opinions on music in a public forum such as newspapers, radio or TV.

Very rarely do you find an art critic who hasn't undergone some sort of training in art history. Or a radical example: would you employ someone with an interest in

woodwork mending your roof? If the answer is yes, you may as well stop reading here, because from now on things get worse.

I am writing this from a Swedish perspective, but in most cases media is, by and large, the same throughout most of the world. But one thing we certainly do have a problem with in Sweden is that general knowledge about the arts has gone downhill very quickly since the sixties. The other day, I discussed Hieronymus Bosch and Keith Haring with a regular Joe. Relatively few people in Sweden would have had this discussion. It has nothing to do with economy, but cultural capital, to use a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu.

Cultural capital is not regarded as an asset in Sweden, even if you apply for a position where it should be. It follows that we get rock music critics who really do not know the first things about music. If you don't believe me, reach for the nearest music magazine or daily newspaper and read a couple of reviews. Do they really tell you anything about the music? I am sure you can find out how the new album compares to a previous one, and perhaps what the lyrics are about, and maybe whom the singer is dating at the moment. But what does the music sound like?

In order to write about music, you have to know something about it. At least that's my opinion. If you don't, but still enjoy listening to music, perchance from a trainspotter's point of view, you have to go for what you know. And as long as your thoughts are not aired in public under the heading of "expert", it's fine by me. I feel very strongly about music, and I know many others who share my feelings no matter which type of music were are talking about. Let's not get fooled by cretins.

Should you be interested in reading more about music and media, I suggest you read parts of Simon Frith (ed.), *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural*

*Studies. Volume II, The Rock Era.*  
Routledge, London & New York 2004.