

Rock criticism's musical text: Robert Christgau's writing about words and music in song

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'We all respond aesthetically to an information nexus comprising sound recordings, live performances, videos, printed mediations (reviews, press releases, interviews, features, sometimes entire books), and rumour. Inevitably sound recordings become the "oeuvre". But it's the nexus I write about.' (Christgau, 1998, p. 6)

Taken from the introduction to Robert Christgau's 1998 collection of essays *Grown up all wrong*, this comment¹ captures the familiar pull between writing inward to the record, and outward to the culture. Christgau's broad 'nexus' is where the academic study of rock journalism to date resides, and it may well be where the academic study of rock criticism ought to reside. Rock criticism reflects rock music – or 'popular music' more generally – in positioning music in a social, political and cultural context (Jones 2002, Lindberg et al 2005, Schulenberg 2017); the origins of both rock music and its criticism are of especial interest (Ubl 2008, Powers 2013, Goldstein 2017).

However, attending to context can yet leave behind the recordings: after all, even in Christgau's assertion, 'sound recordings' are first in the list and 'inevitably become the "oeuvre"'. A complementary approach to the field would raise the retrospective question: what textual 'method' did rock critics adopt? More generally, how can such a textual method be understood, framed, critiqued? Such an approach would certainly run 'against the grain' of rock criticism, at least immediately or instinctively but, as this paper will demonstrate, there are gains to be made. Thus, the paper is positioned in an unexplored intersection between the study of rock journalism and music theory, an intersection tricky for the baggage that music theory can bring, or can prejudicially be assumed to bring. Dave Headlam (1995) makes a useful distinction between 'writers on popular music' on the one hand, and 'musicologists and music theorists' on the other (p. 314), but soon (p. 316) narrows the latter pair to 'music theorists', and it may well be that 'music theorists' is the better term, not least to invoke, for better or worse, their historical tendency 'to treat musical works as autonomous, self-contained entities with unified structures' (p. 315), precisely the stereotype that energised Christgau.

In what follows, I position myself as much as possible at the journalist's shoulder as (in this case) he writes about a particular recording. The exercise is first historical: the reviews have been largely removed from their quotidian immediacy, such a virtue of Powers (2013). The emphasis is secondly on the words of songs, for a number of reasons: 'popular music' and certainly rock music is largely song-based (although 'instrumental music' returns as a theme), rock journalists are often non-musicians (possibly reflecting the auto-didactic musical education of rock musicians themselves), and, like much writing on music, rock

journalism necessarily occupies what Lindberg et al (2005) describe as rock criticism's 'ban on musicological terminology, a black hole that breeds metaphoric circumspection' (p. 342, and see also Maus 2001).

Born in 1942, Robert Christgau began writing about music in, or just before, 1967 (Christgau 1973, p. 1, Christgau 2015, p. 167) and continued to do so in 2017, fifty years later. One soon learns in studying Christgau (and not unusually for music critics) that quantity is a consistent challenge – for example, at the time of writing, Christgau had filed 16,000 record reviews of varying length² – with the consequence that so very many words allow many interpretations and approaches. In this paper, I examine Christgau's critical writing on music primarily from 1970 to 1989 and, while I refer to some examples of music that appeared after 1989, the principal research attention concludes at eighties' end.

Christgau's criticism works at varied formal levels between sustained essays and the consumer guide, and the latter supplies much of my evidence. The form of the consumer guide is always framed by album title and grade, but varies in quantity from the one-word, one-sentence comment on Simon and Garfunkel (1970, B)³ to, for example, the 247 words and nine sentences of Public Enemy (1988, A+). The consumer guide is necessarily a synecdoche, part representing the whole, and words in song often provided the specific detail that helped to substantiate the evaluation. The final evaluation (B and A+ in these cases) is inevitably important. I preserve the grade in my references below, but call it to attention only where relevant (the whole topic of evaluation in Christgau is an area for considerable further exploration).⁴

I issue two broad caveats. The capsule reviews appeared during this period chiefly in *The Village Voice* magazine, with which Christgau was associated from 1974 to 2006 (Christgau 2015, pp. 284-5, and see Powers *passim*), and which provides, from a research perspective, welcome consistency. In the magazine, of course, reviews appeared in the form familiar in such locations: one review next to another by a different artist whose work was issued at the same time. However, I've attended to the gatherings of those reviews in books, where reviews are grouped by artist (Christgau, 1982, 1990, 2000), an ordering which is also followed in Christgau's website (www.robertchristgau.com).⁵ Secondly, with specific reference to the reviews of the early 1970s, Christgau produced many of those reviews in 1979, having received the commission for the book collection: in one source, one third of the reviews were produced at the latter period, in another, two thirds.⁶ This fact must thwart any temptation to read in historical significance to a particular review at and for that time. However, I also take the view that a retrospective review is still a review of music that appeared at the earlier date. Thus, for example, if I should refrain from describing, with possible significance, the *writing* of the review (referred to below) of *Stage Fright* by The Band of 1970, for fear that the review was written in 1979, nevertheless the album itself did appear in 1970. The album may well contain an important point about words and music pertaining to that time, allowing that the review might have been written considerably later. The problem is less germane for the eighties reviews.

The paper divides in two: the first one examines how Christgau conceives of the word-music relationship: this section selects short extracts from a wide range of reviews. The second section examines how Christgau can be understood to be doing music analysis: this section is focussed on longer passages from a more specific selection of case studies.⁷

Three aesthetic principles: diction, voice, and instruments

Collections of rock criticism are not unusual, varying by degrees of editing: on the one hand, collections such as Goldstein (1970), Kent (1994) or Williams (2000), with relatively little editorial intervention, and on the other hand Avery (2011) and Aronowitz (2011), carefully edited retrospective collections. Meltzer (2000) and Bangs (1988) represent a mid-point, the latter containing considerable editorial organisation and a substantial introduction by Greil Marcus. Christgau is unusual in having composed substantial retrospective and self-reflexive introductions to three of his collections. These three documents (Christgau 1982, 1990, 2000) are to my mind of exceptional importance, and the first two contain passages that help develop a sense of the musical text that Christgau heard (1982, pp. 17-20, 1990 pp. 12-16).

First published in 1981, Christgau's introduction to the collected criticism of the 1970s⁸ reflected expertise developed in writing about music between 1967 and 1979, a period which was decisive in the emergent form of rock music.⁹ In the lengthy and important introduction (Christgau 1981, pp. 3-20), Christgau arrives at song during the second paragraph of the section entitled 'The Criteria' (ibid., pp. 17-20), where the first challenge is to find a name, with four possibilities aired:

Song is most of what's left. Alec Wilder, that renowned connoisseur of "American popular song", claims that it pretty much died around 1950,¹⁰ so I guess I'm attracted to something else. Maybe it's streetsong, or electric folksong, or (forgive me) songpoetry, or just American semipopular song, a neat term that unfortunately sounds too arty. For if the '70s taught me to respect the idea of songpoetry, they also taught me to treasure the common wisdom of the pop lyric. (p. 17)

Not one of these possibilities displaced 'song' as such, although 'semipopular' became a favoured term. Definition's problem aired, time then to describe the new song and its words, and the next passage covers diction,¹¹ words themselves, making an important distinction between 'heightened vernacular' or 'colloquial specificity' on the one hand and, on the other hand, 'image-laden versifying'; and allowing for 'nonsense syllables' and 'the sincerely dumb stuff':

Even in the '50s I appreciated a well-turned lyric, and in retrospect the heightened vernacular of Leiber and Stoller and my man Chuck Berry seems a clear precedent for both the colloquial specificity and the associative flights of writers as diverse as Randy Newman, John Prine, and August Darnell. But I was a big fan of nonsense syllables, too, and I liked the sincerely dumb stuff.

In the late '60s I retained those affections, but not without condescension - for a while it got harder to hear Smokey Robinson for the wordmaster he was and is. I was never taken in by the image-laden versifying so many young composers served up as poetry - despite such literary lights as Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Van Morrison, and Tom Verlaine. (pp. 17-18)

Now comes the first crucial point, in my reading. This passage contains a sixth and final type of diction, the political song, and ends with cliché, but makes the important point:¹² that words are there to 'enrich' a 'vocal stance' that is both 'passionately conversational' and 'rough-hewn':

I've always believed the basic evocative task of the words was to enrich the music's passionately conversational, often rough-hewn vocal stance. But only in the '70s did I realize that I'd never developed the habit of expecting philosophical or political aperçus from a song. This isn't to say I never got them - thanks Clash, thanks Sly. But they were always lyrical rather than analytic - these were songs, after all. And usually, the song that made me say aha merely reminded me of something that had slipped my mind. One way I've gotten into country music is as the domain of the truest singer-songwriters (and interpreters) - there are a hundred cheatin' songs with more truth in them than any but five or so of Jackson Browne's. Banal, maybe, but remember that cliché about clichés - they only get that way by saying something real. (p. 18)

I extrapolate from this the idea that, in this conception, words are in some way subservient to voice, and work only in tandem with voice: 'these were songs, after all'. Christgau then veers away from song towards instrumental music, so that 'songs' are not the whole of 'music' and, indeed, in general terms, the possibility of instrumental music is an important point to make about songs.

Music comes first: the songs I love include instrumental compositions/performances from Hendrix to Eno to Hound Dog Taylor. And music is more than beat and electricity - in addition to the wonderful melodies (rock and rollers have uncovered a lot of sweet, simple ones as well) there is the little matter of how those melodies are sung. Improvisation is also a major factor, though to these jazz-fledged ears rock's improvisatory integrity inheres more in choruses, riffs, licks, and sheer spirit than in the long solos that so few of its players have the chops or imagination to sustain. (p. 18)

All that said, now comes the second crucial point. This second principle works in a direction contrary to the first, in which words are now a significant addition to instrumental music. The first sentence and start of second are what matter, and the sentence ends back in a consideration of semi-popular music:

But lyrics do something for music - they bestow (or clarify) (or complicate) meaning. And thus they can make a context for music that by pop standards is quiet or spare or dry or lifeless or forbidding, so that in the end the most hyperactive ass-shake ideologue can learn to enjoy semipopular rock-by-

historical association - acoustic guitar meditations or synthesizer fantasias or rhythmic leaps or idealized raveups, sometimes even without drums. I know, because it's happened to me - with Taj Mahal, Pere Ubu, the Meters, John McLaughlin. (p. 18)

In summary, and for my purpose, I extract three things from the seventies introduction, and these points hold for the period under review: the first is the point about rock diction and its 'colloquial specificity', and then the two-directional view of words and music, words there only to add to what's already present in the voice; and words there to give meaning otherwise lacking to a music-instrumental context.

A film documentary on Christgau (Lovelace, 1999) concludes perfectly to a track by Sleater-Kinney, 'Words and Guitar' (1997, A), a track that illustrates all three points, including the two-directional tug. It opens with a pentatonic melody played on Carrie Brownstein's guitar alone; the song that follows is nothing if not characterized by Corin Tucker's 'rough-hewn vocal stance', the words subservient to that vocal stance; a little later, the opening guitar melody returns sung with words, the instrumental melody of the opening thus given word-related meaning. The words are colloquial, though a bridge section allows a touch of dream and metaphor: 'I dream of quiet songs, I hear the silky sounds'.

In place of equilibrium: words and music

Song being rock music's governing principle, the writer on rock music thus has to decide on the balance between words and music - and a paradox soon emerges. Although the recordings contain words aplenty, rock critics, reflecting their assumed audience, are 'there for' the music. Theorising the nature of rock criticism, Lindberg et al reasonably start (at p. 15 and see Michelsen 2015 p. 215) with the history of *music* criticism, but Christgau also gained directions from *poetry* and its criticism (Christgau 1969 a). How did this balance or tussle between words and music in song play out in Christgau's writing?

I first present examples of the way that Christgau conceived of the relationship between music and words in song in broad terms. Perhaps an ideal of equilibrium is captured in one phrase describing Tom Verlaine (1987, A-): 'His lyrics sound like his voice sounds like his guitar', its three elements balanced, mutually constitutive of each other. Elvis Costello 'makes the music make the words' (1981, A). And of The Pretenders, the same three adjectives applied to words and guitar: 'And she conveys these changes with her voice as well as with her terse, slangy, suggestive lyrics. James Honeyman Scott's terse, slangy, suggestive guitar steals don't hurt either.' (1979, A-).

Such balance is found in various examples where words and music are bound together, to a greater or lesser extent 'equal': Joni Mitchell 'has a talent for melody that equals her talent for words. When sung, those iambs make the melody soar.' (Christgau 1973, p. 216 (1973)). The balance then supports high grades, such as the following three examples: 'It's one thing to come up with four consecutive title hooks, another to

make the titles' (The Wailers, 1974, A), 'This is an amazing pop tour-de-force demonstrating that if the music is cute enough the words can be any old non-cliché' (Nick Lowe, 1978, A), and 'he's tried to convert the sharpest couplet he'll ever write – "De do do do, de da da da/They're meaningless and all that's true" - into a philosophy of life. He's just lucky it was possible musically.' (Police, 1986, A-) By comparison, the following three examples describe a consistency of mediocrity between words and music: 'From such confusions flow music as clunky as these heavy-handed semi-improvisations and would-be tone poems. Not to mention word poems.' (Emerson Lake and Palmer, 1971, C), 'Vandross can attach tropes like "sugar and spice" and "she's a super lady" to undistinguished melodies and make me like them' (Luther Vandross, 1981, B+), and 'musically this is fairly foursquare, not clever enough for good pop nor unrelenting enough for great rock, and the lyrics are pretty foursquare too' (Tom Robinson Band, 1978, A-).

In four examples, a verb or verbal phrase encapsulates the bringing-together of words and music: 'find' (Family, 1972, B+: 'their stubborn lyricism finally finds suitable melodies'), 'define music to match' (Genesis, 1973, B, where Tony Banks does so for Peter Gabriel's 'idea' and 'complexity of tone'), 'validate' (Stevie Wonder, 1976, A: 'as validated by the wit, pace, and variety of the music, they [the words] come close to redeeming the whole genre'), and 'put into context' (Donald Fagen, 1982, A: 'Fagen's acutely shaded lyrics puts the jazziest music he's ever committed to vinyl into a context that like everything here is loving but very clear-eyed').

The close correspondence of words and music is one possibility; more often, however, words and music are out of step. In three examples, the word 'music' is positioned as the greater achievement of already-worthy words:

Maybe lyrics that say what they seem to say are a commercial strategy. But, more likely, they're there to reinforce the message. Which as I said is music. (1983-5 essay on Marshall Crenshaw, co-written with Carola Dibbell, Christgau 1998, pp. 299-300.)

The lyrics, which set oblique but never opaque romantic vicissitudes against a diffidently implied existential world-historic, aren't the secret of their lyricism, and why should they be? These Aussies make music, with Robert Forster's intensely sincere vocals and Grant McLennan's assertive but never pushy hooks pinning down the melodies. (The Go-Betweens, 1986, A-)

As usual, the pleasure of the lyrics is mostly tone and delivery - plus the impulse they validate, their affirmation that you can write songs about this stuff. Plus, right, the music. (Lou Reed, 1989, A-)

Far more often, however, music is doing or achieving something the words fail to match or reach: thus is the paradox defeated. This Dave Mason review turns on the repeated insistence that 'songs have words', to the detriment of a record whose musical conviction is undermined by the words:

I love 'Feelin' Alright' myself. But I've never wondered for a second what it means, and only when the music is as elemental as 'Feelin' Alright' can such questions be overlooked. I mean, songs have words. This is both complex and likable-to-catchy, with a unique light feel that begins with the way Mason doubles on acoustic and electric. But he doesn't have the poetic gift that might justify his withdrawal from "games of reason" in the immodestly entitled "Just a Song". Songs have words. (1970, B)

This review of The Band's *Stage Fright* is similar: the dates of both in 1970 may indicate the working-through of these issues in recorded songs at that period:

What gets in the way of this follow-up, however, is neither natural alienation nor critical overanticipation - it's the music itself, which simply overmatches the words. (...) And if the settings are too complex for what Robbie Robertson knows, they're too unfocused for what he doesn't know, as the confused politico-philosophical grappings on side two make agonizingly clear. Memorable as most of these songs are, they never hook in - never give up the musical-verbal phrase that might encapsulate their every-which-way power. Which perhaps means that they don't have much to say. (1970, B+)

To cut forward in time, eighteen years later, a similar condition is found in the rap band Public Enemy: the band's producers have invented 'the kind of furious momentum harmolodic funk has never dared', containing in its sound 'a revolutionary message [Chuck] D's raps have yet to live up to - which isn't to say that isn't a lot to ask or that they don't sometimes come close.' (1988, A+).

Examples now proliferate. The band Spirit 'play better than they write, and since they still play songs, that's a problem. A worse problem is that the lyrics are rarely as cerebral as the music.' (1970, B) War's 'chants often say more than rock's so-called poetry.' (1971, B+) For Richard and Linda Thompson, Christgau wishes 'these lyrics earned their dourness as persuasively as the music does.' (1976, B+) Two generic generalisations: Michelle Shocked 'reminds us that this singer-songwriter puts music second, just like they all do.' (1988, A-); Counting Crows 'might live up to the songs in them if the band conceived the tracks as music first and songs second. Folk-rockers never do.' (1993, B-). For two further singer-songwriters, words get in the way: Ian Dury (whose 'genius is for lyrics', 1981, A) 'could do with more tunes and less talkover' (1980, B+), while Billy Joel is 'still a wordy bastard who can't leave a simple piece of music alone' (1983, B+). With Linton Kwesi Johnson, whose recitation of poetry to reggae was an important innovation, Christgau is concerned more with his 'musicality':

As if to dispel suspicions that he's an interloper, the poet emphasizes music - sometimes dubwise, sometimes jazzy, with guitarist John Kpiaye cutting the difference in a satisfying show of state-of-the-art support. But Johnson's command of the tonalities and rhythms of Jamaican English is the

most musical thing about an artist whose musicality isn't in question, and the more room he gives his players, the less that leaves him. (1980, B+)

A mismatch of words and music can result in an ironic relationship, as in this classic example: 'It was the perfect Stones paradox – the lyrics denied what the music delivered.' (On 'Satisfaction', 1972, Christgau 1973, p. 224). Or this balanced judgement on Stevie Wonder: 'What makes the contradictory platitudes of his lyrics worth following through is the rhetorical impetus of his music.' (Christgau 1998, p. 142 (1976)).

Within 'music', the voice is sometimes specified as the decisive element, as in this appreciation of Van Morrison, whose voice is rendered as four present participles:

"Listen to the lion", he advises later, referring to that lovely frightening beast inside each of us, and midway through the eleven-minute cut he lets the lion out, moaning and roaring and growling and stuttering in a scat extension that would do Leon Thomas proud. The point being that words - which on this album are as uneven as the tunes - sometimes say less than voices. Amen. (1972, A-)

Similarly: 'when you're so single-minded about singing pretty it's hard to convince anyone you care what the words mean' (Matthews' Southern Comfort, 1971, B-) and 'Wyatt's way with a lyric is one of the things that makes his hypnotic quaver so musical' (Robert Wyatt, 1984, A-). Gaining the B grade, a 1975 review of the Miracles observed a run of rhymes (homosexuality, society, variety), 'but print doesn't do it justice anyway', since the effect of the song resides in 'the intonations, the falsettos, the backups, the orchestration'.

Counter-examples, where words work more convincingly than music, are unusual. The Pointer Sisters do so through interpretation: 'there's something overly temperate about the music, and most of the songs have been interpreted more smartly by artists who care as much about words as they do about notes.' (1978, B-) The Pretenders invent memorable words and, in so doing, elicit a comparison with Joni Mitchell: 'Anyway, it's always the words I remember, not the melodies. I mean, I never thought they were such hookmeisters to begin with, but at times this relies so much on texture and flow it sounds like a punk *Hissing of Summer Lawns*.' (1981, B+) Christgau twice used the deliberate phrase 'poetry readings' of The Fall (1981, B and 1983, B-), the first review observing that 'these arty lefties are definitely going for poetry readings with two-chord backing.'

Some artists were consistently interesting for Christgau in their solution to the relationship of words and music, and I select six for illustration. The positions they represent build upon the previous discussion. The first two (Costello and Armatrading) continue the theme of the balance between words and music, still informing the evaluations. The next two (REM and Laurie Anderson) are exceptional cases, both extending the function of words into unintelligibility (REM) or modernist innovation (Anderson). The fifth and final

example (King Crimson) picks up the point made in the seventies introduction about instrumental music given meaning by words, albeit words misguided in purpose in Christgau's view.

Elvis Costello was understood in these terms from the start: 'Fascinated by his lyrics' in 1977, Christgau discerned a 'malady' that 'results from overconcentration on lyrics and can be cured by a healthy relationship with a band.' (1977, B+). A year later, 'I find his snarl more attractive musically and verbally than all his melodic and lyrical tricks' (1978, A). A further year later, and Christgau has to wrest with words that are 'sociopolitical' but less 'memorable' and, in any case, still subservient to the earlier 'instrumental and (especially) vocal attack':

He needs words because they add color and detail to his music. I like the more explicitly sociopolitical tenor here. But I don't find as many memorable bits of language as I did on *This Year's Model*. And though I approve of the more intricate pop constructions of the music, I found *TYM*'s relentless nastiness of instrumental and (especially) vocal attack more compelling. (1979, A-)

If Costello was at this time pushing consistently at the A grade, Joan Armatrading was locked into B+ for similar reasons: words subservient to voice, but the words also less interesting, which may explain the grade difference. In her 1977 B+ 'most of the meaning of the ordinary-plus lyrics is conveyed by stance and nuance.' A year later, same grade:

The secret of Armatrading's songs is their plainness, but it's also their drawback. When she hits an image – 'I read your letter yesterday/It fell between the covers/And my bare skin' - she lights up a real life. More often, though, she just says what she has to say with whatever unprepossessing idiom is at hand, and her melodies are even less inclined to witticism than her words.

Third, the band REM presented an innovative challenge, and Christgau tracked through a gradual shift in the word-music relationship. In 1982, gaining A-, including 'physically incomprehensible lyrics', 'this headlong tumble proves them the wittiest and most joyful of the post-garage sound-over-sense bands, probably because they make so little sense that their sound has to be articulate indeed'. A year later, still A-: 'By obscuring their lyrics so artfully they insist that their ('pop') music is good for meaning as well as pleasure, but I guarantee that when they start enunciating - an almost inevitable move if they stick around - the lyrics will still be obscure.' By 1986, B+, 'just how many recapitulations of their lyricism one needs is clearly beginning to trouble those who took it too seriously in the first place. The players still make them and the singer-lyricist still refuses to define them'. The 1988 review of *Eponymous* turns on a contradiction or conceit: each player contributes elements (including Stipe's words) that together constitute 'rock and roll', but only when the band somehow transcends rock and roll does it capture 'the real thing' in both 'brains and muscle':

At first, with Peter Buck pouring out cunning hooks and sweet rondels, Bill Berry locomotivating past any hint of wimp, Mike Mills forthrightly tuneful, and Michael Stipe moaning and mumbling and emoting as if he knows exactly what he's singing about, rock and roll is all they need - it's poetry, it's energy, it's beauty, it's meaning enow. Yet only as they decide that maybe rock and roll isn't enough after all does their music embrace the brains and muscle of the real thing. (REM, 1988, A-)

Fourth, Laurie Anderson brought out the innovative possibilities of words and music in what he was to term in 2001 her 'Julliard-style postmodern artsong' (where "'can't sing" is perhaps an advantage'). In 1982, A-, despite the general truth that 'like protest singers, novelty artists put too much strain on the words', Anderson presents a variation on 'boho Americanism (and sexuality) - a variant that adds only a voice, not words, by which I mean ideas.' Casting Anderson as 'top-class' as an 'art-rock lyricist' in 1984, still A-, 'given how often art-rock projects are sunk by literary malfeasance, not to mention Anderson's fundamentally verbal shtick, she'd better be [top-class].' For another 1984 release, now A, the balance of words and music that we saw earlier is achieved: 'words carry this aural document, but minimal (if not minimalist) accompaniment and arrangement (and of course, performance) assure that their movement is always musical.'

Fifth and finally, the band King Crimson epitomizes a situation where a band's *oeuvre*, which includes both songs and instrumental music, is better off without words. In 1974, gaining B: 'As usual, things improve markedly when nobody's singing'. In 1981, still B: 'It's amazing how somebody who gabs as much as Robert Fripp gets fucked up by words.' Despite being 'musically, not bad', 'throw away that thesaurus'. By 1984, B-, Christgau expresses the problem in terms of instrumental music: 'side two again demonstrates Robert Fripp's rare if impractical gift for sustained instrumental composition in a rock context' because, in turn - instrumental music presented in a context where song is the norm - 'side one again demonstrates that the guy [Adrian Belew] neither sings nor writes like a frontman'.

Close examination of Christgau's work in the 1970s and 1980s reveals principles applied to diverse examples of rock and other music: although an equilibrium of words and music in song is possible, and an important idea for the writer to allow, by and large words are subservient to music's creation of meaning in song. There is also a relationship between these principles and evaluation.

Christgau the musical analyst

What I referred to as a paradox in writing about music in song is deeply embedded: a strand of nineteenth-century aesthetics turns on the relationship between words and music or, within music itself, between absolute and programme music (Lindberg et al 2005 pp. 15-18, and see for example Bowie 2001, Maus 2001, Scruton 2001). In terms of academic writing on music, the work of music theorist Kofi Agawu points

towards a productive dialogue between two seemingly remote areas: the study of rock journalism and music theory. From a symposium on Adorno's 1925 essay on Schubert, this comment of Agawu's captures the challenge: 'Taking writing seriously or indeed defining analysis as a mode of writing is not unheard of among Anglo-American music theorists, but pursuing its implications through radical exploration of writing as such is an activity awaiting fuller exploration.' (Agawu 2005, p. 52) Elsewhere, and in an intervention that intervened in an important debate within music theory (Christensen 2001), Agawu described 'analysis as performance', including analysis described as 'hands-on, parasitic inquiry of the first order. It guarantees nothing save the pleasure – the edification, if you want to get pious about it – of doing' (2004, p. 275). That is to say, within music theory, a more performative and playful model was at least posited.

The nub of the issue, fundamental in all writing on music, is that Christgau writes *in words*, so that, as a common currency, the words of songs often become the key element. Whatever Christgau might think or say about the musicality of songs, because words are the medium of writing, words necessarily rule. 'Writing about music is writing first': a Christgau title (2005), but also a fundamental truth and starting-point. What makes Christgau especially interesting and challenging is that he was explicitly dead set against musical analysis *per se*. Devon Powers touches on this with direct reference to Christgau, astutely focussing on a passage published in 1969, and worth quoting at greater length than Powers's extraction:

Periodically, I get to feeling guilty because I am a music critic - I hate the term, but I suppose it applies - who knows nothing about music. I have listened to a lot of rock and jazz, of course, and I do know a good deal about the development of American music. But I can't read music.¹³ After several patient lessons, I am hard-pressed to detect even the simplest chord changes. I never count time. And I don't know the first thing about harmony. (Actually, I do know the first thing--it has to do with sound waves. I don't know the second thing.) Furthermore, I know that stuff means something to musicians, even rock musicians. Worse still, some listeners care about it too.

But I am expert at assuaging my own guilt. To concentrate on the formal elements of music, I tell myself, is to make the assumption that has constricted the arts in this century, namely, that a work exists apart from its environment, that it is a thing-in-itself which has to be understood in itself.

Bullshit. (Christgau 1969 b)

Powers couches the passage (Powers 2013 p. 121) in terms of identity and postmodern relativism (for example, *ibid.*, pp. 99-101), and the passage leads on to a discussion of Christgau's 'staunch ownership of his own prejudices' (*ibid.*, p. 121). Seen from a perspective closer to the musical text, a few other points can complement Powers's extrapolation. First, the passage was motivated by a review of concerts of *jazz* – this might explain the essay's absence from Christgau 1973 - and jazz as primarily instrumental music would always stand slightly apart from Christgau's song-focussed attention.¹⁴ Second is the complicated position

the passage assumes about the technical expectations of producers ('that stuff means something to musicians. Even rock musicians.') and receivers ('Worse still, some listeners care about it too.'). Third is the idea that a hard divide existed between analytical attention and a broader social, political, cultural context: this generates the one-word sentence 'bullshit'.

By 1990, the same concerns were still present, but less bluntly than in the 1969 passage, the confessional aspect now abandoned: the views of producers and receivers are still matters of 'meaning', while the text/context divide is now 'philistine' on the one hand (because music has 'formal attractions of its own') and 'evasive if not effete' on the other (to make too much of 'the microcosm these works create').¹⁵

Without doubt there's a sense in which rock criticism's subject has always been a cultural organism that doesn't generate fixed meanings - whose meanings are defined not just by artists (even collectively), but by "noncreative" workers in the distribution network and, crucially, by fans who convert product to their own uses. And while it's philistine to pretend that the music has no formal attractions of its own, that it doesn't produce works that impinge unaided upon those who know the language, it's evasive if not effete to make too much of the microcosm those works create. (Christgau 1990, p. 13)

In this respect, Christgau's 2015 memoir *Going into the City* is useful in at least two regards. Its fifth chapter is not only a reminder that Christgau was schooled in English literature, but also that the approach taken towards English literature at Dartmouth College was informed by the contemporaneous work referred to as the New Criticism (Christgau 2015, pp. 113 and 123-4). Christgau was frustrated by this approach - 'most of what I learned there was wrong' (2015, p. 97) - but, even so, ends the chapter with close readings of two specific poems, by William Butler Yeats and by William Carlos Williams.

Secondly, and more immediately to the point, Christgau's memoir suggest at various points that a view of writing about music that allowed for close analysis differentiated his approach from that of both Richard Goldstein and Ellen Willis: Richard Goldstein's writing was 'analytic in fits and starts and seldom specific about musical detail' (Christgau 2015, p. 176), while Willis's essay on Bob Dylan 'wasn't specific enough about music either - that remained a lacuna for her' (pp. 176-7).¹⁶ Both Christgau and Willis 'were hardly alone in missing the core musicality' of current music (p. 200), but 'we shared our failure to describe music *per se* with every early major rock critic' (p. 201). Greil Marcus, on the other hand, 'insists on honouring the primacy of rock and roll as *music*' (p. 203), the italicized 'music' repeated at p. 231. Elsewhere, on Willis and Nelson again: 'But neither was much for describing physical facts, and as a result neither much conveyed how music sounded - a common enough challenge that rock criticism's pioneers defeated in their own ways as they stuck at it.' 'And it's my guess that for writers as gifted as Willis and Nelson never to have found language to describe music means that in the end they didn't enjoy music for all it's worth. When

Ellen and I were feeling our way through the music of the '60s, we scoffed at such notions. But we were wrong.' (Christgau 2011)

However, if Goldstein and Willis weren't 'analytic' or 'specific' enough, what would take their place? Alec Wilder (1972) represents consistently for Christgau the type of musical writing that had to be overcome, albeit by passing critical remarks on Christgau's part rather than considered length: 'technically percipient and intellectually vacuous' an oxymoronic summary (Christgau 2000 b). We saw above Wilder mentioned in Christgau (1982), for the titular phrase 'American popular song' and the cut-off date 1950, but Christgau's antipathy goes deeper, into Wilder's preference for the so-called 'great American songbook' (Tin Pan Alley and the Broadway song) over what followed, as well as an analytical approach that emphasises harmony, illustrated by musical notation. The distinction between Wilder (1972) and, for example, Charles Hamm (1983) is drawn out in a brief but useful synopsis (Christgau 2000 b). Elsewhere, an obituary for Robert Palmer points to the *via media* sought between precise description and musical analysis: 'he was describing untamed music with an easy colloquial clarity that rarely resorted to the technical terminology he understood perfectly well. Rather than valorizing harmony and structure, he focused on sound and rhythm, which he knew to be the musical stuff of rock and roll - and also believed were the keys to the universe.' (Christgau, 1997) Wilder, however, who died in 1980, continues energetically to be derided in the memoir as a 'midlevel songwriter turned nitpicking powermonger' (Christgau 2015, p. 43). In fact, Wilder (1972) avoided direct comparison with songwriters that followed 1950, but Gene Lees's foreword to a 1990 reissue suggests that Wilder really did believe that 'after 1955, the amateurs took over' and that 'the use of language itself deteriorated', under lyricists exposed only to 'songwriters who supplied Elvis Presley' (Wilder (1972/1990), p. xvi).¹⁷

All that said, Christgau can be a systematic music analyst, as demonstrated by a sustained and singular 1996 paragraph on DJ Shadow's album *Endtroducing* (1996, A+). Its provenance in an essay, allowing of greater space, rather than in a capsule review, is itself expressive.

The up-to-date materials do their part, however. The thirteen tracks, which range from under thirty seconds to over nine minutes, draw on four major sound groups. Most essential are the beats, built from drum phrases and bass lines looped and layered with incomprehensible attention to detail. While the bare melody is generally carried by a naturalistic organ or piano riff, horn or horns, guitar, even sometimes a bass line, at decisive junctures it will turn symphonic – in aura if not fact, since I bet the strings and such come mostly from soundtracks and garage-sale obscurities. For seasoning we get cello, triangle, tympani, backup choruses, a wealth of good old-fashioned scratching, and the miscellaneous audibles DJs love. For purposes of this CD, these avoid machine and nature references to focus on the dregs of recorded sound itself, celebrating and exploiting and joking around with the world of music in the age of electronic reproduction – scratchy surfaces, distorted transmissions,

groaning turntables, digital malfunctions. Finally there are the words, which given the lack of lyrics *per se* are surprisingly prominent. Sometimes unrecognizable raps or songs make brief appearance – is that Kevin Coyne moaning about rain in the middle background of ‘Changeling’ (and does his lawyer pay finder’s fees)? But a much bigger role is played by spoken-word swatches from the vinyl beyond, appropriated with a cockeyed assurance that is at once definitive and impossible to pin down. (Christgau, 1998, p. 427 (1996))

I first think that the analysis is true to the music, as illustrated by listening to a track such as ‘Stem-Long Stem’ (DJ Shadow, 1996). By its four-part division (beats, melody, ‘seasoning’ for instrumentation, and words), Christgau analyses the music systematically, leaving only the specificity of notes or chords as the domain of the music theorist. Within each heading, musical elements are precisely listed, the six types of ‘seasoning’, for example. Numbers of tracks and timings are noted. ‘Words’ are carefully separated from ‘lyrics *per se*’, and divided into sampled ‘raps or songs’ and ‘spoken-word swatches’. This may not be music theory as professionally recognized, but it is surely writing about music of a precise kind. ¹⁸

Be that as it may, for after all the Shadow example is an exception that might suggest a rule,¹⁹ the way in which musical analysis impacts upon discussion of words *per se* can be demonstrated by three examples. The point can be taken back to an early discussion of Leonard Cohen, in which Christgau observes (of *Songs of Love and Hate*, 1971, A-): ‘Well, I don’t trust Cohen’s melancholy anapests any more than I do his deadpan despair; there are plenty of songwriters both naive and arty, as well as page poets, with a fresher sense of language.’ Those ‘melancholy anapests’ are bound up with the fact that five of its eight songs²⁰ were in three time, generating anapests (and dactyls) aplenty. We note the readiness to describe a song using technical language, a look-it-up literary term, but even leaving it at that term already wrenches the song from the musical and towards the page-poetic context.

Secondly, both as New York Doll and solo artist, David Johansen was almost entirely a *habitué* of the A grade,²¹ but Christgau’s review of *Here Comes the Night* (1981, A-) contained a criticism: ‘True, the words aren’t what they were in the Doll days – “Marquesa de Sade”, which rhymes “girl”, “world”, “pearls”, and “social whirl” with an insistence that makes me wince, is typical.’ However, the track (at 0’42-1’15), with its salsa beat, adds an internal run of rhymes to balance the end-rhymes Christgau extracts:

Your mother *told you*... At least you would always *have your pearls*
How could she *know you*... Tucked away at school with all the *other girls*
While she would *scold you*... And then go out on her *social whirls*
She never *told you*... You are just like *any other girl*
Except for your diamonds *and your pearls*

Finally, near the start of what became hardcore punk, *The Punch Line* by the Minutemen in 1981 (rated B), generated this review (in its entirety) which quotes the words of a single track 'History Lesson', noting the absence of rhyme and scansion:

They're politniks who love punk, with a name that mocks hardcore's rightwing rep and their own aesthetic - these eighteen "songs" average under fifty seconds apiece. The lyrics don't rhyme or even scan, less poems than the jottings of young men given to cultural bullshit. "History Lesson" – “hundred thousand years ago homosapiens stood erect mind empty fresh created love and hate created god and antigod human slaughtered human for power” - gets the flavour: not Fredric Jameson, but better-informed than the skinheads they play for. And where last year's seven-inch *Paranoid Time* could pass for speed-rock, the funky dissonance here has no parallel in the genre or anywhere else: not Ornette Coleman, but better-informed than the Circle Jerks they play with.

Returning to the track, which lasts under a minute, we find music that make the words into a form different from the string of words that Christgau hears and transcribes. Respecting the music's hard-right margin, the words appear as transcribed in DIAGRAM ONE, which adapts Dai Griffiths's idea of 'verbal space', with the *line* a category shared by both words and music in song (Griffiths 2003, pp. 43-8). Concerning Christgau's claim that the 'lyrics don't rhyme or even scan', the transcription brings out the pair of rhymes 'ago' and 'told', 'erect' and 'fresh' while, as scansion, the first three lines all end in heavy stresses: a-go, told, e-rect, fresh, hate, (anti) god. Following that passage, a rhythmic trick akin to music's hemiola, where the four-syllable phrase 'human slaughtered' is presented within varying numbers of beats, and heard in turn within this four- or eight-beat musical phrase. That is to say, two beats and three beats are varied, perhaps evoking something of Gerard Manley Hopkins's sprung rhythm (Hobsbaum 1996, pp. 53-70). Picking up on Agawu's call for 'taking writing seriously or indeed defining analysis as a mode of writing', Christgau's precise attention to the track fosters further music-analytical engagement.

These diverse musical examples – DJ Shadow, Leonard Cohen, David Johnsen, and The Minutemen – set alongside extended passages of Christgau's criticism together constitute selective drops in a deeper ocean, but suggest that academic attention could aim strategically to integrate the words of rock criticism back into their musical context. The point is really this: rock criticism is not simply a large collection of prose – even a large collection of prose that looks outward to rock history and culture - but also a large collection of prose directly related to a large collection of music. It is not only the activity of reading rock journalism, in magazines or books or on a website, it is also about reading prose while listening to very many pieces of music, chiefly albums in Christgau's case, and comparing what the writer has to say against one's own sense of the music's content or value. Coming up with an adequate methodology and account of this corpus of work will take a long time and possibly, as with Lindberg et al (2005), many authors working collaboratively. The above contribution flags up some of the issues and offers ways forward.

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¹ Also quoted by Linderg et al 2005, p. 155, and continued onto Christgau's sentence: 'Of course popular music is a collectively produced "cultural practice"'.
² Statistics for the consumer guide can be found at http://robertchristgau.com/cg_stats.php

³ As this reference immediately indicates, I refer only to artist, date and grade, leaving album titles to the interested reader to find either at robertchristgau.com or in one of the book collections.

⁴ The grading system changed over time. It is explained in the website at:
<http://robertchristgau.com/xg/web/grades.php>

⁵ Anyone who studies Christgau is indebted to Tom Hull for his magisterial work on Christgau's website.

⁶ Christgau 1982, p. 7: 'I'd have to write two-thirds of the book from scratch'. Christgau 2015, p. 333: I soon saw that my published columns would provide less than two-thirds of a book that would properly represent the decade'.

⁷ The sections are extracted from a longer study which also covers: Christgau's technical attention to the words of song; an analysis of metaphor and specificity, and a review of words in song in three types of music that drew Christgau's attention in the 1980s: 'rap and related dance musics, world beat and what I've broadly designated postpunk' (Christgau 1990, p. 18, Christgau 2000, p. xi) . My thanks to Dave Laing for advice concerning the project as a whole.

⁸ Christgau 1982 appeared with 'rock albums' in the title, while Christgau 1990 was left genre-free as 'Christgau's record guide'.

⁹ On 'emergent', one of a trio that includes 'dominant' and 'residual', which arises from Raymond Williams (1975), see Christgau (1985).

¹⁰ Reference to the title of Wilder (1972).

¹¹ The phrase 'rock diction' is used three times in Christgau 1969 a: pp. 238, 240 and 241.

¹² The point may have derived from Simon Frith 1981, pp. 35-6: reviewing Frith 1981, Christgau wrote that 'though I've also spent years thinking about the aesthetics of lyrics, it was the chapter this sociology Ph.D. calls 'Pop Music' that solved their riddle for me' (Christgau 1982b, and see Christgau in Marshall and Laing, 2014, pp. xiii-xiv).

¹³ In Britain too, also in 1969, Nick Logan was turned down for a post on a British music magazine, twice in one year, 'because I couldn't read music – which you had to be able to do to work on the *Melody Maker* then.' (Gorman 2001, pp. 90-1) 'Oh well, fuck you', thought Logan (ibid., p. 91).

¹⁴ This is not to say that jazz was ever far from Christgau's concern: see extended book reviews on for example Thelonious Monk and Louis Armstrong, as well as A+ grades for both Armstrong and Monk, Ornette Coleman, David Murray, and Sonny Rollins, who has more A+ plus grades than anyone!

15 On ‘effete’, *OED*: ‘That has exhausted its vigour and energy; incapable of efficient action. Also, of persons: weak, ineffectual; degenerate. More recently, effeminate.’

16 For representative samples of Goldstein and Willis, see Goldstein (1970) and Aronowitz (2011), and see also Astor (2010) and Powers (2013).

17 While Christgau didn’t address directly the relationship between ‘rock diction’ and the words of the ‘great American songbook’, he was certainly attentive to music before rock ‘n’ roll. See his essay on Nat King Cole (Christgau 1998, pp. 17-21), followed immediately by George Gershwin (pp. 22-6).

18 ‘Music appreciation’ might be the missing term here. And note that Christgau is provocatively happy to accept the terms ‘middlebrow’ and ‘belletristic’ at p. 7 of Christgau 1998.

19 See also Christgau’s analysis, utilizing clock time for accurate reference, of Johnny Griffin’s saxophone solo on ‘In walked Bud’, on Thelonious Monk’s 1958 *Misterioso*. For example: ‘Then, boom, Griffin goes crazy. Phrasing double- and then triple-speed toward the top of his register while signalling intermittent slowdowns with low r&b honks and blats, he works fast-moderate-fast as if extending a God-touched Sam “The Man” Taylor break toward an infinity lasting three minutes and twenty-one seconds. Monk yells or grunts approval at 3:42, 4:35, 5:38’. (Christgau 2009)

20 ‘Last year’s Man’, ‘Dress Rehearsal Rag’, ‘Famous Blue Raincoat’, ‘Sing another song, boys’, and ‘Joan of Arc’. Cohen’s vocal-verbal lines relate to the underlying three in a variety of ways.

21 The New York Dolls share only with Bob Dylan the distinction of two consecutive A+ grades, as well as two consecutive A+ grades for compilations by Franco Luambo.

