Crawling on All Fours:

THE SHAMEFUL RETREAT OF POP MUSIC CRITICISM

BY TONY GREEN

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I liked the movie “The Matrix.” Not just because I got to see Lawrence Fishburne play Master Po to Keanu Reeves’ Young Caine in a cyberspace “Kung Fu.” That was cool too, but what really got me was how the whole thing was a metaphor for pop music criticism.

Think about it: The mass of ill-informed, self-indulgent, corrupt, racist, sexist and anti-musical musings on arguably the most ubiquitous cultural entity in our lives has formed a world of its own, a fantasy world so compelling in its wrong-headedness that it’s become a kind of objective reality. But an odd one. A reality where a poor sap from nowhere is “The Most Influential Artist of the Century” because, well, hell, it says so right here on the coverline of this glossy weekly.

At the risk of dumping on an already-dumped-on profession, I’ll say this: It’s all the critics’ fault. If not for the situation itself—so many factors being out of our control—then for not trying hard enough to change it.

It’s not like they—we—have anything to lose. They get no respect these days. Not from artists, who seem likelier than ever to answer a sarcastic question with a knuckle sandwich. Nor even from other writers.

“I’ll tell you what critics are,” said Darrell Dawsey, the former features editor for the now-deceased hip-hop glossy *Blaze*. “They’re the ones who walk into the restaurant, talking real loud and dropping big words into a cell phone that doesn’t work. They’re talking all this shit, but there isn’t anyone on the other line. Critics generally are talking to other critics and that’s it.”

That’s true, but only up to a point. Critics talk to other critics, but they don’t write for other critics, at least not all the time. The conversations that critics have about the music they write about, and the self- and externally imposed problems they have in doing their jobs, don’t wind up on the printed page.

The one thing critics don’t often publicly criticize is the process of being a critic.

It takes a dollop of self-loathing for a critic to talk about his profession, since few are blameless when talking about the ills of the business. Nearly all have fudged a review on deadline; many have quoted the artist’s publicity bio after a late night on the town. Some may well have kissed up to an editor with a wonderfully crafted piece about the artist whose song the editor lost his virginity to in college. Nearly all critics operate within boundaries determined by the good graces of the major entertainment corporations.

To use another metaphor, the critic who talks about criticism is like the wise guy who turns federal witness.

“When you do that,” said Charles Aaron, senior editor at *Spin* magazine, “you’re arguing against your chosen profession. Subtlety is not a big part of being a pop artist, or a pop critic for that matter. The only way to have a really nuanced discussion is to stretch the ground you are working on, to expand the limits of the medium you’re writing for.”

But a lot depends on how stretch-resistant the medium proves to be. How the discussion gets framed; what angles are used and whether those angles are determined by video exposure and record sales; the sex, age and ethnicity of those doing the framing; or some vague sense of zeitgeist: These factors often determine not only how critics write but how what they write gets communicated to the reader.

LESTER BANGS WOULDN'T WORK TODAY. "FIRST, NO ONE WOULD WORK WITH HIM. IF NOT THAT, HE'D EITHER GET BEATEN UP OR SHOT."

When I was writing for dailies, I used to look to magazines as bastions of critical thought. Now, after writing for them, I find that writing for magazines has its own set of limitations. At exactly the moment that music is at its most unrestricted, when a kid from Osaka can download the new Fatboy Slim single via MP3 and Jay-Z can repackage Broadway musicals for suburban kids, pop criticism has seemingly gone into the fetal position in the face of recording industry clout and the critics' own careerism. Magazine X fawns over Mediocre Album Y, while mag Z plays ball with the marketing strategy of Artist Q. Writer C writes about hot-selling artist G while negotiating a book deal on that same artist.

What is needed, I feel, is someone like Lester Bangs, the legendarily gonzo music writer and former editor of *Creem* magazine. Someone who would write—and print—that a superstar's collaboration with high-profile rappers was a fake and a washout, or that a grizzled rock band's greatest-hits tour was an inhuman bore. Someone who, even if he didn't hit the mark all the time, would at least get people talking.

"He wouldn't work today," said *Spin*'s Aaron. "First, no one would work with him. If not that, he'd either get beaten up or shot."

The magazines' position in all of this is understandable—their survival is based on it. Access is key to producing the important stories. To get access, you have to make the artist's corporate representatives happy. That's true of more magazine journalism—musical and non-musical—than you might think.

When Bangs was working, Aaron said, "there was a lot less money at stake and fewer people involved. Back then, he could get into a fight with Lou Reed and still get another interview. Now I say one bad thing about an artist and the record company is faxing threats over to *Spin*, or their publicist decides never to work with the magazine again."

That scenario gets played out with dismaying regularity.

"I wrote a fairly sarcastic cover story on R.E.M.," Aaron said. "I mean, they were on this stupid overblown tour and were tired and jaded, having just done this fake glam-rock album ('Monster')." So he wrote a story that said so. "And I get knocked off the Warner Brothers mailing list for three years."

It didn't end there. When *Spin*'s editor needed a writer to fill in on a Green Day story, Aaron said, he was told that Warner wouldn't give *Spin* the interview if he got the assignment.

The result, Aaron said, has been music journalism minus the fizz: writers blurring the line between writer and compadre, and between critic and independent-label publicist.

"Compared to the stuff someone like Bangs would write," Aaron said, "what we are writing are complete blowjobs."

Some were shocked by the spate of physical assaults on music journalists (from *Spin* and *Blaze*) in the past several years. Others saw it as the inevitable offshoot of the mutual back-scratching that goes on between music executives and music critics, a relationship that's as old as entertainment journalism. A label that puts you up in a five-star hotel for your story has the right to expect you to sand the rough edges off your story before it hits the stands—right?

Magazines should be the home for the most serious criticism. They are supposed to be the ones with the "informed" reader who understands the field well enough to appreciate critical thinking. But when the dialogue is stunted at the magazine level, it isn't long before the effect trickles down to dailies. Once you move beyond the major entertainment centers (New York, Los Angeles, Nashville), a good part of the information about trends and artists published in newspapers comes from magazines.

"There are two things that stunt the conversation at the daily level," said *Revolver* magazine's managing editor, J.D. Considine. "First, you have things that are actionable, as in things that you know are true but that someone will sue you if you actually write (about). Like the reason that married artist A keeps cutting duets with artist B is because they've been lovers for the past three years."

And the second?

"I hate to say it, but ignorance," Considine said. "Ignorance of what music criticism is supposed to do."

Explaining to people—especially newspaper editors—the difference between a "report," as in a news report on a murder, and an "argument," as in a review, can be exasperating.

In Baltimore, where until last year he was the *Sun*'s music critic, Considine tries to write pop criticism that is more fluid and less canonical than the typical hierarchical approach (which involves simply judging a work as either good or bad based on culture-centric values). Valuable criticism, in his view, proceeds from the idea that musical quality is defined different ways by different audiences. And those values do not exist on a simple, hierarchical scale. Each form of music has its own set of aesthetic values, modes of performance and definitions of virtuosity. Soul-bluesman Bobby Rush's costume changes and neo-burlesque backup dancers may not meet the definition of "blues" to someone who defines the music by the standards of, say, blues-rock. But they do to Rush's audience, whose definition is as valid—more valid, according to many blues scholars—as that of the blues-rock aficionado.

"People tend to think that music criticism is just about whether a piece of music is good or bad," Considine said. "Music criticism is about analyzing how and why music works, and the impact it has on the listener."

In short, a pop critic has to be able to provide context. He should have a working knowledge of music and be able to use that knowledge to understand the individual aesthetics governing each genre of music—understand them well enough to discern how an individual performance, song or album meets those criteria. He has to be able to explain Steve Earle to a Massive Attack fan so that the Massive Attack fan can say, "Yeah, I get it," at the same time that the Steve Earle fan says, "You got it right."

But the hierarchical approach is still tempting. A critic's job is evaluated by someone who thinks hierarchically—namely his or her editor. Editors often imagine that they have highly developed musical reasons for, say, considering two British bands the greatest practitioners of an American art form. One former editor told me, "You have to admit that people who listen to stuff like the Beatles and the Stones and singer-songwriters are just plain smarter than people who listen to stuff like disco, rap, funk and heavy metal."

Which made me wonder how hard it was, during his tenure, to talk seriously about Metallica.

How can a critic survive such editors?

One strategy is the "two for them, one for me" approach. If three of your paper's assistant managing editors all get together to watch "M*A*S*H*" re-runs every Thursday, a think piece on James Taylor's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, followed by a review of the televised Joni Mitchell special, would be a pretty good idea. This will then give you the leeway to write about something you actually think is important.

Such a strategy is necessary for one simple reason: Explaining to editors that their opinion isn't universal, that it is formed by demographic factors such as class, sex, race and geographical location, is futile.

Midway through an interview for a story at my former Florida newspaper on the anniversary of Jerry Garcia's death, a Grateful Dead expert noted the high incidence of Dead references on television. He attributed these to the number of Dead fans among the people writing the scripts and developing shows. This suggests that the multitude of Grateful Dead references in pop culture, especially those following Garcia's death, was due more to the homogeneity of the media brain trust than anything else.

And it calls the premise of the story into question: Was Jerry Garcia of enough general cultural interest to rate a section-front centerpiece a year after his death? Especially considering that a huge chunk of the paper's readership consisted of African-Americans, younger readers more interested in the

Backstreet Boys, Limp Bizkit and DMX, and older readers who regarded rock ’n’ roll as the first sign of the apocalypse (one wag went even further, suggesting that infatuation with the Dead was not absolute even among middle-aged white boomers, whose tastes, like any group’s, tend to be pretty diverse)?

By what standards was Garcia important enough to be afforded that iconic status? Surely not musically; on that score, Garcia would have to wait in a long line. As for the Deadhead phenomenon and Garcia’s cult-figure status, they were fascinating but hardly unique—the same type of claim could be made for Sun Ra and his Arkestra, for example. Or John Coltrane, who until recently had a church named after him.

Another editor I spoke to immediately after Garcia’s death defended the torrent of news coverage, saying, “He meant a lot to a lot of people.” Well, to whom, exactly? What kind of people? A statistical majority of people? A wide cross-section of people? Do their cultural views include everybody or do we take their definition of “culture” at face value because these “people” are just more important (or as my former editor would say, just “smarter”) than everybody else? And is their importance determined by some intellectual gymnastics or by their importance to advertisers?

There’s another advantage to thinking hierarchically—of judging an artist’s or genre’s “importance” based on an arbitrarily constructed scale. It makes churning out copy easier. Pretending that an act, album or concert exists on a higher plane is a major selling point (particularly for the nostalgia acts) and makes for practically prefabricated leads and story angles.

These days, I cringe at all the concert previews of mine that began with leads like “In a world of mindless ska and bludgeoning punk, (this nameless act) stands out.” Or “With rap dominating the black cultural landscape, there is still room for the subtle aesthetics of soul, presented by (nameless act).”

With that kind of lead out of the way, writing the rest of the story is often a matter of simply puréeing the press clips (or what you can glean off the wire), dropping in a quotation and topping it off with a dash of attitude.

“You can’t just say what is good about an album,” *Spin*’s Aaron said. “You have to enter into this broad-based type of discussion—‘this album is a commentary on this or that problem or this or that genre. . . .’ That notion of setting up an aesthetic straw man and then positioning the thing you’re writing up against it is such an obvious critical game. And I don’t want to participate in that mode of writing.”

This is especially so when “music critic” often means just “rock critic,” said Jeff Chang, music and culture writer for 360hiphop.com, Russell Simmons’ entertainment/culture web site. Instead of viewing rock as one particular aesthetic, the rockist approach proceeds from the notion that rock is the defining cultural movement of the century. Some daily critics, like former *Newark Star-Ledger* writer and current Rock and Roll Hall of Fame nominating committee member Claudia Perry, see the term “rock” as a term of convenience, used with the understanding that most of the music being discussed isn’t rock per se.

The “rockist” view, on the other hand, places rock at the aesthetic center of pop music. All else either is influenced by it (the stuff that came after rock), feeds into it (the stuff that came before rock), aspires to be it (the stuff that ain’t rock, but has “rock ’n’ roll attitude”) or rejects it (the stuff that is not real music).

This attitude affects not just baby boomers but younger critics, who often apply the same parochial attitudes to a different body of music. A fellow writer once told me of a critic who firmly asserts that “white kids are only pretending to like hip hop” and regularly loads his year-end Top 10 picks with an assortment of indie rock releases.

“You see a lot of writing that tries to deal with a wide range of music from a rock framework, using rock values,” said Chang. “I think it started with the music critics coming out of the whole alternative journalism movement of the ’60s and ’70s. Then, when they moved into mainstream dailies, they brought those aesthetics with them. And the battles they fought at those dailies were won a long time ago, so that so much of the aesthetics they fought for have become the accepted way of looking at music.”

MOBY ONCE SAID THE PROBLEM WITH WRITING ABOUT TECHNO WAS THAT THERE WERE NO LYRICS AND DJS WERE LOUSY INTERVIEWS. HE WAS RIGHT.

That doesn't just mean that Ellington, Berlin, Armstrong, Parker, Basie, Sinatra, Joplin, Williams Sr., Monroe, Holiday, Jimmie Rodgers, Muddy Waters and Mahalia Jackson were all just warm-ups for the Beatles (or important because they influenced Elvis and Chuck). Or that the music of the past 20 years reached its apex with Fugazi, the Replacements and Ani DiFranco. This rock-centered outlook also severely limits a critic's ability to address a staggeringly wide range of music.

If you are viewing the world through such a limited scope, you are going to see only so much. The functional artistry of guitarists such as Steve Cropper, Leo Nocentelli, Wah Wah Watson and Jimmy Nolen is lost on someone who judges guitar skills by solo playing standards, and who also misses the whole point of sampling them. Likewise, someone who defines authenticity in '80s corporate or indie-rock fashion won't understand the appeal of a drum 'n' bass performance—in which you don't see anyone holding guitars, much less playing them. And if you dismissed '80s R&B (Full Force, Guy, New Edition) and dance-pop (The System, Paula Abdul) while it was still current, the appeal of The Backstreet Boys and Christina Aguilera is completely mystifying, just as the continued importance of DJ culture will mortify someone who still wears his "Disco Sucks" T-shirt.

Another problem affecting critics in all genres is the need to ascribe "meaning" to pieces of music. This is most often accomplished by analyzing the lyrics, which to some critics isn't *a* critical tool, but *the* critical tool. Talking about lyrics is an effective way of analyzing some body of work in some genres, as well as aspects of a particular body of work. It's also effective when talking about music from certain traditions—Texas singer-songwriters or classic pop. But when used as an overarching approach to music, it establishes a subtle criteria: To really understand music, you have to have a degree in American Literature or some grounding in literary criticism. Which is understandable, since the mode of criticism that came out of the late '60s—and survives intact today—was set forth by people who were more comfortable with words than sounds.

"I know a lot of people who grew up in English classes in which the teacher was reading Simon and Garfunkel lyrics as if they were poetry," said the *Star-Ledger*'s Perry. "Which was annoying then, and it's annoying now."

The problem with this approach is that it implies that the ultimate understanding of music is the province of folks who can afford a six-figure educational debt.

More significantly still, the music-as-literature approach assigns less weight to—or plainly ignores—forms of music without conventional lyrics (ignoring, as well, the notion that artists are conscious of how their words sound as much as what they mean). Techno artist Moby once said that the problem with writing about his genre was that there were no lyrics and that DJs were lousy interviews. He was right. The end result of the lyric-centered philosophy is writers who can churn out a 20-inch preview on a blues-rock band playing a 100-seat club but less than 10 on a rave that draws 10,000.

One wonders how much less coverage West Coast "gangsta" rap would have received if the artists didn't talk slowly enough, and in a sufficiently narrative fashion, for word-obsessed critics. Or if they hadn't added enough profanity and violence to spawn streams of discussions about the "effect" the music was having, which again served to shift the discussion away from music that many weren't prepared to discuss—or weren't interested in discussing.

"It's kind of funny," said Josh DuLac, music critic of the *Sacramento Bee*. "For the longest time, you heard about how newspapers were trying to attract at-risk readers: young people, minorities. The thing is that they seem to miss why these people don't read the newspapers; all you have to do is write about what they care about in a way that's interesting, not from a 45-year-old, white-male perspective. That's why you see them turning to other mediums."

But being a 45-year-old white male shouldn't mean you can't write effectively about music that isn't part of your experience, any more than being an Asian male means you can't discuss Afropop. What is really needed is a way of discussing music that tunes into what crosses generational, ethnic and gender barriers.

Follow me here.

Considine tells the story of a friend who traveled to Turkey, where he ran into a clutch of Dylan fans, none of whom spoke English. They said it didn't matter that he was singing in a foreign language, that the sound of his voice was what made them listen. "You could tell," they said, "just from listening to him, what he meant."

Now imagine, as an exercise, taking all the lyrical interpretation, deconstruction and analysis of Dylan's songs, putting it in one WordPerfect file and dragging it to the trash. Imagine analyzing Bob Dylan's music with the sonic quality of his voice and his music as the central aesthetic. Not only do you understand his music on a different level, but it forces you to address all music that way. Which means that the snippet of Sly Stone vocal meandering through Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," the sound of a Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan melisma, have, at their most essential levels, as much currency as a Dylan lyric.

You've also come closer to talking about the way people actually experience music, and the importance of the expressions that stem from those experiences. Cultural anthropologist José Limón went so far as to suggest that the act of dancing was the one true form of popular criticism, since it was the one act that was not weighed down by class-based determinants. For him, the dance floor was the last place that true cultural agency could be expressed. George Clinton echoed that in "The Electric Spanking of War Babies." He suggested that dancing was a way to counteract totalitarian media programming: "You can walk a mile in my shoes/but you can't dance a step in my feet," he says, declaring that "it's a bummer to find that your mind like your behind gets a spanking in time" and that "you stand a chance if you can dance." Which was appropriate, since I likely wouldn't have paid attention to what he was saying if the track wasn't so damn funky.

Sacramento's Josh DuLac and 360hiphop's Jeff Chang are both critics whose careers and musical tastes matured during the mainstreaming of hip hop (late '80s-'90s). So the salient question to pose to them, as well as to writers like Greg Tate, is this: If there is a rock "way" of criticism, is there a hip-hop way of criticism (with all the strengths and weaknesses that idea implies)? One that critiques the musical world through the sensibilities of someone who came of age with the Technics 1200 turntable and the MPC 2000 sampler, not the Fender Stratocaster and the Marshall amp? What are the aesthetics for hip hop—a genre whose values seem to shift every season?

The problem with going to the well (hip-hop magazines) to get critical ideas on hip hop is that, to some, the well is pretty dry.

To Darrell Dawsey, the former *Blaze* editor, hip hop is not about criticism. Hip hop's ultimate implication, he says, is that "if you weren't there, then you missed it." In this performative view, hip hop is all about eliminating the space between performer and audience. The critic is an interloper at best, an underminer at worst.

Writer/critic Greg Tate, however, feels that serious, top-to-bottom, hip-hop dialogue is possible and necessary. As an idea, though, it's on hold right now. Back in the mid-'80s, Tate, Barry Michael Cooper, Nelson George and Harry ("The Media Assassin") Allen were all writing regularly (mostly in *The Village Voice*). In many cases, these critics approached hip hop with the same irreverent, funny, sarcastic, devil-may-care attitude Bangs had. They showed that the music supported serious writing, and in the process they invented hip-hop criticism. Tate, for example, famously clashed with Public Enemy's Chuck D. over the sexism and homophobia that crept into their neo-Black Power philosophy.

“HIP-HOP HAS TAKEN OVER POP CULTURE,” SAYS GREG TATE, “YET IT HASN’T CHANGED ANYTHING.”

George’s writings about hip hop, some of which were collected in his books “Hip Hop America” and “Baps, B-Boys and Bohos,” revealed an uncanny ability to view the music in a larger context, while remaining true to its aesthetic heart. By the ’90s, the D.C.-based periodical *Uncut Funk* appeared, along with the initial issues of *VIBE*, and a new crew came out, headed by writers like Danyel Smith, Michael Gonzales and dream hampton.

“That was back in the days when writing about music was attracting intellectuals,” Tate said. “All of us back in those days used to read some article about black music written by a white writer and go, ‘Man, that’s bullshit!’ Now, writing about music doesn’t have the same kind of attraction, and the field is a lot more crowded (with the proliferation of glossies like *XXL* and *The Source*). You have intellectuals who talk about music, like Skip Gates and Cornel West, but they aren’t music people.”

The biggest problem, Tate said, is that there is no solid future in writing about black music. It’s a double whammy, actually, since there is an overall dearth of music critics (as opposed to music writers or music reporters, a distinction many media outlets fail, or refuse, to make). Considine offers this challenge: Name all the pop critics who have been doing the job for more than 15 years, and then name all the ones who have recently made a quotable observation.

The old crowd is still writing, but often in other areas. Cooper moved on to movies (“New Jack City”), George moved on to books (“The Death of Rhythm and Blues,” “Where Did Our Love Go,” “Hip Hop America”) and cultural commentary. Former *Washington Times* writer David Mills, the publisher of *Uncut Funk*, went on to the *Washington Post*, and then into a career as a screenwriter, winning two Emmy nominations for his work on “NYPD Blue.” Tate’s time is just as occupied with his dual careers as a musician and playwright. This, Tate said, is the creative way of dealing with the lack of mainstream outlets for serious black arts criticism: Affect the dialogue by producing something that forces people to write about it.

In general, there’s a lack of the sense of discovery that fueled a lot of the hip-hop writing (not to mention the music) in the ’80s. Part of it is due to the realization that not only did rock fail to change the world, so did hip hop.

“In a lot of ways, there are bigger fish to fry now,” Tate said. “Hip hop has taken over pop culture, but at the same time, it hasn’t changed anything. You’ve got suburban kids listening to Eve and wearing baggy jeans, but you still have the Amadou Diallos and the Patrick Dorismonds.”

But some critics, like Chang, still see the value in a vibrant, free-wheeling, mainstream discussion of hip hop. Unfortunately, hip-hop magazines generally aren’t initiating it.

Magazine growth razes as it sows. Hip-hop writing benefited because of increased access to money, artists and resources, just as any form of journalism would. And as a result, Michael Gonzales said, there are good writers working in the hip-hop field: Chairman Mao, Sacha Jenkins and Elliot Wilson are just three, he said. But hip-hop magazines now face the same type of pressures that exist at other mags. A rapper who issues a fatwa against a writer over a bad review (something you saw frequently in the PE, Ice-T days) carries a lot more clout if he has a major ad campaign behind him.

“You gotta remember that when *The Source* came out, it was just a fanzine,” Gonzales said. “Now look at it. They write about it in the fucking *Wall Street Journal*. It’s one of the biggest magazines in the country.”

The changing landscape has also changed some writers’ motivation for writing.

“For me there are two different camps, as writers go,” Gonzales said. “There are writers who want to be writers and love hip hop and music in general. Then there are those who get into hip-hop magazines because it will give them an angle for a job at Def Jam.”

If there were a vibrant dialogue, it would show in other ways. It would make it easier for non-music critics—all non-music people, for that matter—to talk about hip hop. If you don't think this is important, consider this: The ability to draw upon several decades of reactionary rhetoric allows people like moral crusader/general gadfly C. Delores Tucker to articulate clearly what they don't like about hip-hop, even if they don't know anything about the subject. In a sound-bite-oriented discourse, you need an effective counterpunch. And if the only thing that a hip-hop scribe can offer in defense is that hip hop "articulates the pain and rage of a dispossessed generation," then that battle is lost before it's truly even begun.

"In a lot of ways, the *VIBE* book (1999's "*VIBE* History of Hip Hop") is good," Chang said. "It organizes a set of principles and judgments, and gives narrative flow to a mass of otherwise disconnected facts. But now that we have a history to argue about, let's argue about it, and see where it leads us. And hip hop, even now, continues to be a form of music under siege, and we need a critical dialogue that allows us to explain what's good about the music we love."

But before we argue about hip hop, rock or any form of popular music, there needs to be a more profound argument about pop criticism. There are, despite all the gloomy rhetoric, writers in each medium who are doing good work. A Tom Moon, Ben Wener, Jon Pareles, John Corbett or Cheo Coker byline stops me dead in my tracks, in addition to the work of the writers mentioned here.

But these questions should be taken to heart: If your writing basically functions to fill space around the graphics, what's to stop your organization from dispensing with copy altogether? Or just inserting ad copy, or having an intern clean up the bio? Do you really think the amount of your paycheck isn't large enough for the company to care about saving? If your columns basically restate the wire copy, if your think pieces are actually philosophical high-percentage shots (taking whichever view will piss off the fewest people, or the fewest people your bosses care about), or if your national "reporting" turd polishes the information already covered by the real reporters (the trades, the wires, the news dot-coms, etc.), what's your purpose? Paraphrasing Dave Marsh's "you can be either first, last or different," the "different," and the ability to make a persuasive case for that difference, is what makes it real criticism.

But at the bottom line, a critic will have to change the way he writes, and change his relationship to his employers, to the media outlets, and to the reader. Can't be done? Who says? We're talking about critics, right? Hey, just write it.