



**Nathaniel Hanson** is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh where he is a B.Phil candidate and Brackenridge Fellow studying Politics-Philosophy and Urban Studies concentrating in Urban Policy and Administration. He is Station Manager at 92.1 WPTS-FM, Pitt's radio station, and is an occasional music columnist for *The Pitt News* through the current media partnership program between WPTS and *The Pitt News*.



## Rest Assured, We Can Save It All

*Creem* Magazine as a Working Class Critique of the Late 1960s Californian Counter-Culture<sup>1</sup>

*The first mistake of Art is to assume that it's serious. I could even be an asshole here and say that 'Nothing is true; everything is permitted,' which is true as a matter of fact, but people might get the wrong idea. What's truest is that you cannot enslave a fool.*<sup>2</sup>

While on the surface this critique by Lester Bangs seems to be reproaching an audience inclined to worship the musicians and artists of the 1970s for their so-called serious messages, Bangs' statement is actually indicative of a certain brand of cultural critique. Bangs and his employer, *Creem* magazine, surpassed mere musical criticism. The heyday of *Creem* magazine — and Bangs by extension — is a period characterized by a collective reaction to the cultural tumult stemming from widespread feelings of alienation among many American middle class college students of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This generation of middle class Americans was raised in an environment of unprecedented economic prosperity. Subsequently, a historically unmatched number of those born into the cradle of newfound American progress were equipped — financially and academically — to enroll in post-secondary academic institutions, creating a surge of economically secure and intellectually conscious young middle class Americans whose primary responsibility was to explore academic interests.

As Terry Anderson suggests, the sheer volume of students enrolling in U.S. universities in this time period created fertile grounds for the dissemination of ideas, reexamination of cultural values, and the potential for student-lead cultural and political change.<sup>3</sup> Running parallel to this influx of middle class students was the development of a new brand of rock and roll gaining popularity in places like San Francisco and Los Angeles, where regional acts began to cultivate widespread followings centered among this new kind of college student.

While rock and roll had been incredibly popular among American youth since the 1950s — not to mention equally unpopular among representatives of mainstream American establishment — the messages

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underlying the music were expressly political only inasmuch as they contained mostly veiled references to sex and the rejection of traditional norms of authority — the church, the school, and the parent. With the onset of the increasingly educated middle class youth of the 60s and 70s, however, themes of sexuality and youthful rebellion expanded to represent more than just teenage angst; instead, transforming expressions of teenage rebellion and isolation into self-consciously political statements meant to present very serious challenges to accepted cultural norms and methods of societal organization.

As the baby-boomers matured, so did their cultural critique. Rock and roll became intertwined with the intellectually curious and politically conscious middle class youth. Already a notorious and popular medium for the expression of rebellious behavior, rock and roll grew to meet the demands and attitudes of its audience, reflecting the counter-culture's rapidly developing political and cultural critique of the newly educated American middle class. Whereas the rock and roll of the 50s may have shocked parents, principals, and preachers, the rock and roll of the 60s and 70s challenged the very social-political infrastructure upon which they were supported. The counter-culture had its musical medium, rock and roll, which grew to become its most popular and powerful unifying force. What arose out of rock and roll's counter-cultural prominence, however, was a demand for a forum of discussion, criticism, and the diffusion of this newly politically conscious musical incarnation. Even still, while various print publications were started to fill this niche, *Creem* established itself as "America's Only Rock and Roll Magazine."<sup>4</sup>

*Creem* was, at the same time, both a part of this counter-culture and one of its biggest critics. While *Creem* was a source for musical — and, by extension, cultural — commentary that, though harder-edged and thus (arguably) more working class than its California counterpart *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*'s core values were still very much in line with the ideals of many parts of the California counter-cultural movement. *Creem* magazine sought to provide counter-cultural insight removed from the intellectually-heightened and privileged California activist attitude typically associated with the movement. In essence, *Creem* and the Detroit rock and roll sound were undoubtedly linked in much the same way that *Rolling Stone* was itself essentially bound to the California counter-culture music scene. *Creem*, through its musical and cultural criticism, pro-

vided counter-cultural critique from within the counter-culture seeking to unite working class realities with the high-minded, intellectually and spiritually based ideals of the California counter-culture. This critique was mirrored not just in terms of the attitudes of its writers, but, perhaps most importantly, the aesthetics of the bands that *Creem* covered.

*Creem's* unique place within the counter-culture is best understood in relation to its San Francisco rival, *Rolling Stone*. Started as an underground magazine dedicated to reporting on the San Francisco counter-culture, *Rolling Stone*, while not as politically radical as the *Berkeley Barb* and other Bay Area counter-culture magazines, focused on the music and counter-culture scene in Southern California. *Rolling Stone* is perhaps the longest running of the 60s counter-culture magazines and is still in widespread circulation. This endurance is indicative of *Rolling Stone's* success in terms of establishing itself as a primary voice of the counter-culture movement.

If this is in fact true, and *Rolling Stone* was indeed the voice of the 1960s counter-culture, then *Creem* could be considered the movement's watchdog. *Creem* was speaking for, and to, the "last frontier"<sup>5</sup> — blue collar towns that, although they had been bastions of the labor movements of the American Left of the 1930s, were much more socially conservative than the major urban centers and college towns associated with the counter-culture movement of the 60s.

In industrial Detroit, the realities of the everyday overpowered the "California Dreaming"<sup>6</sup> idealism of the predominately middle class-centered counter-culture movement. If "psychedelicdom"<sup>7</sup> could provide a more fulfilling way of life than the status quo, *Creem's* Dave

Marsh argued, then it must be just as effective among the youth of the industrial working class as it was with the intellectually and spiritually conscious, college-educated middle class that occupied major urban cultural centers and liberal college towns. California was fertile ground

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for idealistic notions of reason, freedom, and love; 70s Detroit, on the other hand, was as close to barren reality as cities come. Accomplishing

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real change in towns like Detroit was the counter-culture's true challenge.<sup>8</sup> As Marsh saw it, "But if we [the counter-culture] can save the Motor City, rest assured, we can save it all."<sup>9</sup>

The counter-culture of the late 60s was, in the American consciousness, quintessentially Californian, both musically and geographically; it was normatively relaxed, intellectually radical, and, characteristically, middle-class. Rock and roll had been popular among American youth since Elvis Presley's rise to fame in the 50s, but it wasn't until the movements of the mid-to-late 60s and early 70s that it became a forum for explicit political and cultural commentary.

Bands from San Francisco's Bay Area, such as Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead, as well as other musical acts associated with the California counter-culture — like The Mamas & The Papas and The Doors — represented the counter-culture in the American consciousness. Many of these groups, particularly Jefferson Airplane, aligned themselves with the political causes associated with the student movements of the 60s — such as opposition to the Vietnam War — as well as more radical new-left stances of politically active student groups like Students for a Democratic Society.<sup>10</sup> California, to many, was the epicenter of this student-lead phenomenon; it was home to the Free Speech Movement,<sup>11</sup> Haight-Ashbury Hippies, and Black Power. As it was displayed in the media, the bohemians, hippies, and radical political intellectuals all trained in all called California "home."<sup>12</sup>

1970s Detroit was very far from California, both geographically and aesthetically. *Creem* showcased the connection between a very particular type of unpretentious rock and roll and the possibility of a counter-culture that was a variation of the music and student movements in California.

*The alternative culture in the Detroit/Ann Arbor community is first and foremost a rock 'n roll culture. Whatever movement we have here grew out of rock 'n roll. It was rock 'n roll music which first drew us out of our intellectual covens and suburban shells. We got excited by and about the music and started relating to each other on a high plane of energy that has come to be associated with our community; it is around the music that the community has grown and it is the music which holds the community together.*<sup>13</sup>

Whereas the Californian counter-culture held that politics, alternative-life-style, and differing degrees of leftist politics centered the movement, with music being a primary force for the expression of new ideas and artistic community, there was nothing more important to *Creem* than the music. Good music, by *Creem*'s standards, had the ability to break down political and cultural barriers, but, at the same time, was, in its purest form, energized, gritty, and irreverent. This irreverence didn't necessarily flow from political ideology or normative reevaluations, but, in Bangs' terminology, freed people from all restrictions; the music wasn't (inherently) political, the politics were, in effect, musical. That is, everything about the counter-culture that the writers of *Creem* believed in was derived from the music; radical and uncompromising music cleared the way for grounded ideals to follow. Historian Michael Kramer writes:

*Though it emerged within a countercultural milieu in Detroit, Creem did not express a simple, naïve idealism about revolutionizing cultural and political life in the United States. Instead the magazine attempted to develop a critique of the counter-culture in which it participated, while refusing to give up on that counterculture's utopian dream of transforming Cold War America into a more just, vital, meaningful, and fun society.*

While 70s Detroit may have been as un-ideal as they come, its rock and roll scene added a unique sound to the counter-culture. The bands from Detroit during this period were, at their very core, fun — the value that *Creem* perhaps placed in the highest regard. As Bangs wrote, "What's truest is that you cannot enslave a fool."<sup>14</sup> That is, the fun-centric (albeit in some cases explicitly political) message of the Detroit scene stripped away the naïveté of the Bay Area's earnestness.<sup>15</sup> Difficult to define, the Detroit rock and roll sound was louder, more musically simplistic, and more abrasively energized than the typical Bay Area rock and roll band. Speaking in ideal terms, the rock and roll of Detroit was very much reflective of the economic climate and scenery of the town itself. Whereas the music and spirit of Joni Mitchell and Crosby Still Nash and Young lived in the Haight, the state of the Motor City was very much in line with Iggy Pop and the MC5.<sup>16</sup>

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Fun, fast, and loud, the MC5 personified the Detroit (and *Creem*) aesthetic. While *Creem* often referred to the MC5 as the representatives of the Detroit rock sound, they were also one of the few Detroit bands to associate themselves with an explicit political cause — the White Panthers.<sup>17</sup> MC5 manager, John Sinclair, started the White Panthers as an outlet for those who agreed with the Black Panther Party's ideas but happened to be Caucasian. Among the main points of the White Panther's manifesto were calls for: "a total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock and roll, dope, and fucking in the streets, and the free exchange of energy and materials—we demand the end of money!"<sup>18</sup> With a radically "leftist," intentionally shocking manifesto, the White Panthers provided an appropriate political representation of the music of the MC5. The MC5, however, still followed the Detroit/*Creem* musical-political ideology — they were first and foremost an energized, irreverent, and fun band, even in spite of their political message.

The music of the MC5, politics aside, was a medium of awakening, of which political ideas were only one component — one explicitly secondary to the music itself. There is, however, one strikingly troubling problem with the music that *Creem* christened as characteristic of the Motor City: it neglected the music that had put Detroit on the pop culture map.

The notable void in *Creem's* otherwise comprehensive regional music coverage was the actual Motown Sound — the R&B and Soul music distributed and produced by Detroit independent record label Motown Records — that had become synonymous with Detroit. Motown Records became the first "crossover" record label in the US, cultivating a string of hits by artists like The Supremes, The Temptations, and Smokey Robinson. These artists became incredibly popular among black and white audiences alike, becoming a source of pride for the citizens of Detroit.

Paradoxically, in a city that attracted large numbers of southern African-Americans during the great migration via a booming manufacturing industry, a large portion of the working class that *Creem* seemed to associate itself with was, in fact, black. *Creem*, a tool of class unification in the counter-culture movement, seems to have excluded, albeit unintentionally, a major piece of Detroit's working class image from its pages — African Americans and black music. It could be said, then, that



a large portion of the musical demand of the working class in Detroit was for music that was outside of *Creem's* gritty, working class rock and roll ideal.

As popular as Motown artists became within the mainstream, the general consensus among the oppressed black population of Detroit was that the Motown sound, while engaging and entertaining, did not, at least until after the 1967 riots, reflect the political, economic, and social issues of working class African Americans. While it was true that before the 1967 Detroit Riots Motown artists were singing about sexualized love, they were most definitely not addressing the rampant racism, poverty, and oppression faced by Detroit's inner-city African American population.<sup>19</sup> Although Motown hits were made by black artists from the working class, it was music that was meant to racially crossover to reach the widest audience possible, not necessarily represent the interests of the black working class.

While *Creem* did sporadically cover black artists, such as Tina Turner<sup>20</sup> and the Detroit based George Clinton/Parliament,<sup>21</sup> these musicians were arguably more popular with rock and roll focused white audiences than R&B and Soul focused black audiences. Clinton, for example, had migrated to Detroit with The Parliaments (as Parliament was originally named) with hopes of securing a contract with Motown Records. Unsuccessful, Clinton began to take note of the aggressive, rhythm-heavy music of the MC5. The Parliaments became Parliament, a group of black musicians who merged the Pop R&B Motown sound with the loud and aggressive rock and roll of the MC5 to create a new genre: Funk. While Funk would come to be associated with the struggles of poor African Americans abandoned in America's inner-cities, Parliament was generally listened to by white rock and roll youths in Detroit.<sup>22</sup>

*Creem's* seemingly dismissive attitude toward the Motown sound serves as a problematic inconsistency in *Creem's* regionally based aesthetic. The fact that Funk, a genre with close ties to the black working class during the 1970s, in part descended from a *Creem*-endorsed band like the MC5 does help to partially alleviate worries about *Creem's* relationship with race, the working class, and the counter culture. It should be noted that *Creem's* overly white focus does have a negative impact in terms of *Creem's* credibility as a working class critique of the California counter-culture, not to mention the credibility of its particular branding

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of the Detroit sound and ethos as angry, fun, and simplistically irreverent.

The Detroit ethos was essential to *Creem* magazine's unique, opinionated slant on counter-culture music and ideals. *Creem* attempted to take what was a college phenomenon (or at the very least a phenomenon taking place in traditionally culturally advanced cities and intellectual towns) and transpose it to the cultural key of what was a rapidly industrially-deteriorating America. While *Creem* could be seen as promoting music that was, both musically and critically, simplistic, that was the point. Musicians — to Bangs, Marsh, and *Creem* — didn't have to be virtuosos.

Likewise, the message behind rock and roll didn't have to (and by Bangs' assessment, couldn't) be deep and complex. The Detroit ethos only required rock and roll to be irreverent and raw. This irreverence in musical styling would, arguably, lead to irreverence on the entire cultural-political plane. "[Bangs'] vision positioned rock as neither Art with a capital A, nor Politics with a capital P, but as a trashy consumer commodity whose impermanent and derivative sounds could, out of a seeming superficiality, make the kinetic...joyful energies of expression widely available."<sup>23</sup>

In effect, much of the counter-culture movement was made up of those who were privileged to some degree. Indeed, the Baby Boomer generation of the 60s and early 70s was, until that point, the most privileged generation in human history to the extent that such a large number of people could afford to forgo employment and continue their education at the college level. Likewise, the counter-culture that grew out of this movement was generally composed of people with the means to support their dive into radical politics and/or a hippie lifestyle.

Whereas radical leftist politics would always have a certain working class appeal (many of these movements focused on worker's rights, after all), having the means to be an activist outside of a labor organization, not to mention the ability to live an off-the-grid hippy lifestyle, was in some ways at odds with the choices available to those of the working class. The counter-cultural movement, however, as demonstrated through the ideas of groups like Students for a Democratic Society, sought to completely transform society through universal empowerment of all people. In order to be successful, radical democratic

sociopolitical changes must be universally inclusive.

It is here that a problem arises: how can a movement like the 60s and 70s counter-culture, a movement predominantly composed of the middle and upper classes, genuinely empower members of the lower and working classes whom they must culturally, politically, and socially include to execute corresponding universal cultural, political, and social changes? *Creem* reached out to alienated working class youth through its connection to industrial Detroit and the city's particularly gritty brand of rock and roll to transpose the messages of middle class ideals to working class realities, granting it a unique place within the counter-culture movement of the 60s and early 70s.

Whether *Creem*'s results actually reflected the working class attitude and industrial grittiness of Detroit, however, is debatable. While the Detroit musicians covered by *Creem*, such as the MC5,<sup>24</sup> may have grown up in working class homes and provided certain working class grit to their music, *Creem*'s general audience, while perhaps more jaded and gritty itself, was not necessarily anymore representative of the working class than the readers of *Rolling Stone* were in the first place. Working class effectiveness and authenticity aside, *Creem* did offer mainland America the industrial aesthetic of Detroit, promoting music that was made from within the shadows of industrial decay — something certainly unique in a movement of flower children and Bay Area idealism.

While *Creem* did not save the Motor City, it wasn't for a lack of critical taste. The music that *Creem* covered and promoted — the Heavy Metal and Punk forefathers that *Rolling Stone* oftentimes overlooked — eventually influenced powerful musical movements in themselves. The Punk of the late 70s and early 80s that Iggy Pop, MC5, and The Velvet Underground foreshadowed became one of the primary genres of politically-conscious music of a later generation.<sup>25</sup> Whereas *Rolling Stone* shied away from these artists, *Creem* embraced them as the sound of the future, and, in a way, they were right.

In partial terms, *Creem*'s working class, industrial critique of the popular counter-culture did succeed. *Creem*'s Detroit aesthetic — snotty, working class irreverence infused with energetic fury — did, in the end, bring the counter-culture to the masses, even if it took a generation or two to take hold. Ahead of its time, *Creem* magazine proved that Detroit was, after all, the last frontier.

