



(graphic by Nick Meador*)

The Rise and Probable Fall of Pitchfork Media

by NICK MEADOR

The website Pitchfork Media hosts comprehensive music news and features, but many think they're abusing their power with album reviews and editorializing. How long will it last?

"We've taken the world apart...but we have no idea what to do with the pieces... [...] All of our making fun of things isn't making the world any better. [...] We've spent so much time judging what other people created that we've created very, very little of our own. [...] I used rebellion as a way to hide out. We use criticism as a fake participation. [...] It only looks as if we've accomplished something." –Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke*¹

It's unlikely that any music-loving soul using the Internet has gone this long without becoming familiar with – or even addicted to – Pitchfork Media.² The site now gets over 160,000 visits per day from music fans around the world, but it took over ten years, since Ryan Schreiber created the site in 1996, to reach that traffic load.³ Upon discovery, the web site seems like a one-stop shop for those in need of information about today's music. Pitchfork is the single most comprehensive source of music news on the Internet, updating multiple

¹ Palahniuk, C. *Choke*. 2001. Anchor: New York. pp. 111-112.

² <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com>

³ du Lac, J.F. "Giving Indie Acts A Plug, or Pulling It." *The Washington Post*. 4/30/06.

times per day with announcements about tours, festivals, albums, and other artist notifications. Unlike traditional news organizations, most news on Pitchfork is good news.

The site also publishes in-depth interviews with artists and extensive features on a variety of topics. They have a "Forkcast" section, which hosts new MP3s and videos for readers to play or download for free. Their search engine is impeccable, and one can even specify which type of document (i.e. – news, reviews, etc) one is looking to find. For example, if one wants to see if a new song has been premiered on Pitchfork, he or she simply has to type the band's name into the web site search box, choose "Forkcast" in the drop menu, and then click "go." But also, one can find an album review from 2002 as easily as an article published yesterday.

Powerful

For all the site's apparent usefulness, there are an alarming number of flaws. First and foremost is their very manner of rating albums. Increasingly, publications have limited or terminated their use of numbered ratings in music reviews. They are beginning to realize that not everyone likes having an opinion dealt to them before even hearing the music. People welcome suggestions, especially from MP3 blogs, who do little more than say, "This band seems interesting. Download their MP3 for free."

Many publications still use a five- to ten-point system of rating, if they use one at all. On the contrary, Pitchfork uses a hundred-point scale.⁴ This minor fact should be more obvious to readers, but it's not. It isn't even obvious to mainstream news organizations and journalism reviews, which still describe Pitchfork's ratings as a ten-point system. Yes, their scores range from zero to ten, but they also include one decimal point. They rate albums 6.3 or 9.1 or 4.7. They have even rated albums 0.0 or 10.0. However, that decimal digit is almost never zero, because that would equate to a ten-point rating system.

This method of rating instantly gives off an air of superiority, but its strength lies in its subtlety. The

⁴ Pitchfork Record Reviews page.

http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/page/record_reviews



system quietly implies that Pitchfork staffers are capable of *knowing* the value of an album or band, as if it were a fact waiting to be snatched out of a dark cave. Not only that, they have the mental precision to know the difference between 7.6 and 7.7. Their auditory systems have apparently benefited from some genetic mutation incongruent with general human evolution. Forget speculation or hesitation. For a growing number of followers, what Pitchfork hears is the one “true” authority.

The only other source of music criticism online that uses a hundred-point scale is Metacritic.com, but they aren’t even generating their own content. They simply aggregate critic ratings from around the web – from sites that don’t use a hundred-point scale. Averages and compilations of opinions are one great thing about the Internet. Look at Internet Movie Database (IMDB), for example. People regard that as an authority on film ratings when compared to any single movie critic, because IMDB scores are averaged from thousands of common movie-watchers.

In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel give many pointers as to how a news organization should behave if it wants to be considered ethical. One of the main criteria is to adhere to a practice of verification. “Not only should they be skeptical of what they see and hear from others, but just as important, they should be skeptical about their ability to know what it really means.”⁵

A dilemma arises from the notion that a music review is unverifiable. A review is not based on facts – it’s simply an elaborate opinion. What makes this process worse is that it’s irreversible. A Pitchfork writer can supposedly listen to an album a few times before its release date, and then mark the record with a stamp of approval or disapproval. As it turns out, this flighty action can determine the outcome of a band’s career (if there is such a thing).

However, Pitchfork has changed their review on certain instances, if for nothing else than to amplify the illusion of their foresight. Two examples are *Music Has The Right To Children* by Boards of Canada, and *In An Aeroplane Over the Sea* by Neutral Milk Hotel. Upon rerelease, they were bumped from an 8.3 and 8.7,

respectively, to a 10.0 rating, even though the rerelease contained the exact same album as the initial release.⁶ Likewise, Pitchfork has reduced the rating of a rerelease. *Moon Safari* by Air was demoted from 7.9 in 1998 to 5.6 in 2008.⁷ Of course, the original reviews are removed from the website’s general search engine, so that the public only sees the corrected versions, and Pitchfork keeps the glue on the frayed ends of their operation.

Pitchfork is actually a perfect example of being in the right place at the right time, as the cliché goes. They’ve applied an old media formula to the new media of the Internet. People were dying for someone to make sense out of the immensity of the online world, as peer-to-peer networks made it possible for the public to download anything they wanted. File sharers needed a shepherd for the new indie terrain. They were willing to surrender their free will and analytical ability, and let Mr. Schreiber do it for them.

In fact, the site seems to take pride in the way it has undermined traditional music publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, which have dominated the music media world for the past few decades. Kovach and Rosenstiel call this serving as an independent monitor of power, and it’s one of the cornerstones of ethical journalism. “As history showed us, it more properly means watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.”⁸ That sounds like a nice idea, but, according to People Magazine, Schreiber is now among the 25 most powerful people in the music industry.⁹

In the 19th Century, Lord Acton summed up the effect of power in a manner that reverberates through modern society. “And remember, where you have a

⁶ http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/15569-music-has-the-right-to-children-original-review, http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/15573-music-has-the-right-to-children-reissue, <http://web.archive.org/web/20021213042559/http://pitchforkmedia.com/record-reviews/n/neutral-milk-hotel/in-the-aeroplane-over-the-sea.shtml>, http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/20351-in-the-aeroplane-over-the-sea

⁷ http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/14842-moon-safari?artist_title=14842-moon-safari, http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/50114-moon-safari---10th-anniversary-edition

⁸ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel T. 2001. pp. 114-115.

⁹ du Lac. 4/30/06.

⁵ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. 2001. Three Rivers Press: New York. p. 85.



concentration of power in a few hands, all too frequently men with the mentality of gangsters get control. History has proven that. All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹⁰

That’s funny. According to a 2006 *Washington Post* article, Pitchfork’s name was inspired by Tony Montana’s assassin tattoo in the 1983 Cuban-refugee-turns-cocaine-gangster film *Scarface*.¹¹ Is it possible that the web site was founded with the goal of selectively stabbing musicians to death?

Mr. Schreiber nonetheless regards Pitchfork as a journalistic entity – and in some ways, it is. But his definitions, which are splattered all over the *Post* article, are indubitably out of whack: “Honesty is such an important journalistic attribute.”¹² And later, concerning dealing out negative review scores, he says, “On a personal level, I feed bad. But on a journalistic level, I don’t.” Then further on: “It’s not about money; It’s about journalistic integrity.” This blurring of the meanings of words like “honesty” and “integrity” resembles the propaganda of a corrupt government hoping to maintain the last grip of control over a loosening population.

Schreiber has surely recognized the fragile spot on which Pitchfork now stands, since their reputation rests largely on the pawning of opinions, and that’s not quite enough to be called journalism. As Kovach and Rosenstiel put it, “A journalist must be smart enough and honest enough to recognize that opinion must be based on something more substantial than personal beliefs *if it is to be of journalistic use*.”¹³

While Schreiber’s idea of journalistic integrity might not be entirely accurate, Pitchfork isn’t wholly without ethical standards. According to *The Elements of Journalism*, another criterion for responsible news reporting is to keep it proportional and comprehensive. “Journalism is our modern cartography. It creates a map for citizens to navigate society. That is its utility and its economic reason for being.”¹⁴ **This is the root of Pitchfork’s power.** They are more widespread and

dependable in their coverage than any music news source has ever been, projecting their point-of-view to a global audience on a minute-to-minute basis. If music fans start using the dozens of other available tools for navigating the swaths of new music released each Tuesday, Pitchfork will lose that power. But as of yet, that hasn’t happened.

As a result, Pitchfork has been instrumental in eliminating the traditional concept of a music scene. Instead of American scenes like L.A., Seattle, Minneapolis, hot spots have popped up around the world. Some are cities, like Brooklyn or Toronto. However, Toronto is merely the heart of a spirit that ran through all of Canada at the turn of the decade, led by the collective Broken Social Scene. But now even entire countries can develop a musical reputation. First and foremost is Sweden, which has produced more stars of indie rock and electronica in the past five years than any nation outside of the U.S. and the U.K.

If Pitchfork is the first to assert their opinion about a band or album, and the information cannot really be verified, then their view is repeated until it is accepted as the truth. The facts in their reviews (i.e. – where the band is from, the names of songs, etc) seep into the white space, while unfounded claims get priority treatment in the article. “These new characteristics of what we called the Mixed Media Culture are displacing the classic function of trying to sort out a true and reliable account of the day’s events, creating a new journalism of assertion, which is overwhelming the old journalism of verification,” explain Kovach and Rosenstiel.¹⁵

Hence, a Pitchfork writer is no different than a television pundit in an argument during a Fox News program like *The O’Reilly Factor*. Whoever yells the loudest, hits the right emotional triggers, and confuses the audience with uncommon diction becomes king of the soapbox. The difference is that Pitchforkers exude youth, rebellion, and change, and manage to create a semblance of wisdom.

It’s also revealing to compare reviews of two albums that share many traits. Both Anathallo’s *Floating World* and the Decemberists’ *The Crane Wife* evoke Japanese stories and feature multi-song suites

¹⁰ Lord Acton Wikipedia page.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton%2C_1st_Baron_Acton

¹¹ du Lac. 4/30/06.

¹² du Lac. 4/30/06.

¹³ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel T. 2001. p. 109.

¹⁴ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 164.

¹⁵ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 46.



dispersed throughout the record. However, in each respective review, these elements were addressed in completely different fashions.

From Anathallo review by Marc Hogan on July 11, 2006: “*Floating World’s* ostensible centerpiece is the song cycle from caroling, discordant ‘Hanasakajijii One: The Angry Neighbor’ to the, yes, ‘Chicago’-like ‘Hanasakajijii Four: A Great Wind, More Ash’—although naturally, the tracks are out of order and interspersed with the rest of the album. They’re based on a Japanese folktale about a dog digging up gold in a neighbor’s yard. Typical lyric: ‘I, of wicked deeds, snarling mouth/ Wandered away, wandered by.’ Clearly, none of this is Japan’s fault.”¹⁶

From the Decemberists review by Stephen M. Deusner on October 3, 2006: “*The Crane Wife* sounds like their most shapely album to date, resembling a spirited story arc in its set-up, rising action, climax, and resolution. In this structure the three title segments, despite essentially bookending the tracklist, form the album’s thematic centerpiece, the music and story meshing gracefully and tenderly to retell a Japanese fable.”¹⁷

Two albums with similar characteristics. Two opinions expressed with muddled gibberish, steering two totally different reviews. Two fabrications of truth. All within a span of four months in mid-2006.

Influential

Pitchfork’s influence can be illustrated in many different ways. One is to compare their “Top 50 Albums of 2007” with their “2007 Pitchfork Readers Poll.” Here are the top ten albums from both.

Pitchfork Top Ten:¹⁸

10. Burial – *Untrue*

¹⁶ Hogan, M. “*Floating World* album review.” 7/11/06.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/37117-floating-world

¹⁷ Deusner, S.M. “*The Crane Wife* album review.” 10/3/06.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/38886-the-crane-wife

¹⁸ “Top 50 Albums of 2007.” 12/18/07.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/47446-staff-list-top-50-albums-of-2007/page_5

9. The Field – *From Here We Go Sublime*
8. Battles – *Mirrored*
7. Spoon – *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga*
6. Animal Collective – *Strawberry Jam*
5. Of Montreal – *Hissing Fauna, Are You The Destroyer?*
4. Radiohead – *In Rainbows*
3. M.I.A. – *Kala*
2. LCD Soundsystem – *Sound of Silver*
1. Panda Bear – *Person Pitch*

Readers Poll Top Ten:¹⁹

10. Battles – *Mirrored*
9. M.I.A. – *Kala*
8. Of Montreal – *Hissing Fauna, Are You The Destroyer?*
7. Spoon – *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga*
6. Arcade Fire – *Neon Bible*
5. Animal Collective – *Strawberry Jam*
4. The National – *Boxer*
3. Panda Bear – *Person Pitch*
2. LCD Soundsystem – *Sound of Silver*
1. Radiohead – *In Rainbows*

Of all the albums released in the world each year, when it came time to assemble a Best of 2007 list, Pitchfork readers only differed from the staff on two items. Even Pitchfork recognized the uncanny similarities. In the Readers Poll, they wrote, “The rest of the top 10 turned out to mirror our staff selections almost eerily: Eight of your top 10 choices also finished in our top 10.”²⁰ What an odd coincidence! However, it’s important to note that readers were only given a list of 100 albums to choose from when submitting their top five choices. That the staff could find the results surprising points to the possibility that they are ignorant of the negative effects of their work. Either that or they are flaunting bad-ass poker faces.

The situation is worsened because Pitchfork supplies absolutely no public forum to accompany their news. Their comment capability is zilch. It’s even difficult to locate staff contact information, and if one can find their email addresses, it’s best not to expect a response

¹⁹ “2007 Pitchfork Readers Poll.” 1/2/08.
<http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/47707-2007-pitchfork-readers-poll>

²⁰ “2007 Pitchfork Readers Poll.” 1/2/08.



unless your name is Colin Meloy (of the Decemberists) or Win Butler (of Arcade Fire). In fact, the semi-rigged 2007 Readers Poll was the closest thing to a public forum that Pitchfork has ever provided. The downside is that it was a highly controlled and severely edited forum. Kovach and Rosenstiel warn against this. “Though new technology has made the forum more robust, its greater speed and velocity have also increased its power to distort, mislead, and overwhelm the other functions of a free press.”²¹ The site gets away with this because readers are too stunned by the sheer volume of content posted every day to realize that Pitchfork is not fulfilling the role of a music press.

Beyond preventing any reader interaction, Pitchfork also takes drastic measures to assert their control over the public conception of a band, even if that means severely damaging the band’s livelihood. They have become experts at using love-me-but-hate-me tactics. They’ll praise bands so long as it serves their interests, and then unexpectedly tear a band – and the public’s idea of that band – apart. This is what happened to Travis Morrison of Dismemberment Plan, who received a 0.0 rating on his solo album *Travistan* (released by Barsuk Records), even though Morrison’s original band had been highly rated by Pitchfork. “The effects of Dahlen’s review were immediate and disastrous,” wrote Dave Itzkoff, paraphrasing Barsuk Records cofounder Josh Rosenfeld in a 2006 *Wired* article.²²

How can an audience continue to trust an organization with multiple personality disorder? Readers never know when Pitchfork will turn on a growing band, or when they’ll hype some new ultra-obscure one. This is jeopardizing one of the key factors that pushed the organization into the mainstream. “People increasingly see the press as part of an establishment from which they feel alienated, rather than as a public surrogate acting in their behalf.”²³ If Pitchfork alienates more readers than they endear, their success will end.

Sustainable

²¹ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 135.

²² Itzkoff, D. “The Pitchfork Effect.” *Wired*. September 2006.

²³ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 104.

In order to take so many editorial gambles, the site needs a rough formula that will guide how they approach new music. Pitchfork has become like a Vegas casino that develops a way to win every time. They only gamble when they cannot lose in the long run. Even if they hype a band that doesn’t end up breaching the folds of obscurity, they’ll survive as long as some of their pet bands *do* get huge. Hence, the bands are their lifeblood, and two basic reviewing methods evolved to keep the blood flowing.

The first method is to hype bands that they believe could enter the mainstream. Examples are the Shins, Arcade Fire, Modest Mouse, the Decemberists, and Broken Social Scene. All have risen to considerable fame within the past five years, with at least some help from Pitchfork. The second method is to create a façade of extreme obscurity or avant-garde spotlighting. Examples are Joanna Newsom, Devendra Banhart, Bonnie “Prince” Billy, and (more recently) El Guincho. Sometimes they hype a niche movement, like the “freak folk” to which Banhart and others belong. In this case Pitchfork is, by all common reasoning, taking a chance. They are hyping bands that will simply not appeal to most music fans.

This ensures that Pitchfork always appears to be on the edge of music culture, while deceiving readers into thinking they are fighting the oppression of the few major record labels. In fact, bands like the Shins, Modest Mouse, and Arcade Fire are now topping the Billboard charts and playing in regular rotation on FM radio stations – both segments of the corporate music establishment that an independent publication should ostensibly despise.

Sometimes the two methods even cross over; Animal Collective is a perfect example. They are one of the strangest groups to create music in this decade. They seem to deviate from any expected progression in indie rock music. However, for a band that writes such bizarre music, they have built an enormous fan base. This year their name appears relatively high up on artist line-ups for festivals like Coachella and the inaugural All Points West, and they headlined the website’s own Pitchfork Music Festival 2008.

Now even trying to find new music on Pitchfork can be a random act of stupidity, about as useful as



pounding one's head on the glass outside a record store. That's because the site is in danger of becoming the digital boy who cried wolf. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel, the modern press "is squandering its ability to demand the public's attention because it has done so too many times about trivial matters. It is turning watchdogism into a form of amusement."²⁴ There's no doubt that Pitchfork is guilty of rampant sensationalism. But it happens in a calculated way that ensures that they stay afloat even if the bands that they depend on regress into obscurity.

It doesn't take much browsing to see that ratings are more often favorable than harshly negative. The Onion pointed this out with a hilarious spoof entitled "Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8," which turns out, coincidentally or otherwise, to be extremely accurate.²⁵ In 2003, a University of Chicago student doing a computer science thesis analyzed 5,575 Pitchfork reviews, and published the results online.²⁶ The average rating was approximately a 6.7 (which equates to about a 3 on a five-point scale, or a 7 on a ten-point scale).

This would by no means be a terrible review for any album, and many people who read the article would still check the album out, or even purchase it with no prior listening. In other words, **Pitchfork's ratings are designed to appease more readers than they offend, thus ensuring the stability of their audience.**

Profitable

Along with being powerful, influential, and sustainable, Pitchfork is also becoming profitable. The organization claims to be an independent source of music news. But even though they are disconnected from a larger corporation, they are not some non-profit organization committing selfless acts for the benefit of the international music community. "The new danger is that independent journalism may be dissolved in the

solvent of commercial communication and synergistic self-promotion," say Kovach and Rosenstiel.²⁷

Yes, Pitchfork is an independent company, but they inextricably tie themselves in to the success of the bands that they cover. One prime example of this is their now-annual Pitchfork Music Festival (henceforth referred to as PMF) each July in Chicago's Union Park. The line-up is constructed mostly of bands that make Pitchfork's "Best New Music" section. They rope in the bands they've hyped the most for a weekend of concerts sponsored by the foremost beneficiary of the event: Pitchfork Media. They create a fantasy line-up, but only have to commit to that once-a-year event.

Pitchfork produces PMF just like AEG Live does Coachella, C3 does Lollapalooza, and Superfly does Bonnaroo. These festivals exist to celebrate the music – but also because people are willing to buy tickets, and because the production team can make some cash. On the other hand, if ticket sales aren't successful enough, a festival stops happening. Tickets for Saturday and Sunday at PMF 2008 went for \$50, as opposed to the 2006 (inaugural) price of \$35. As of the start of the festival, both Saturday and Sunday had completely sold out, leaving open only single day passes for Friday.²⁸

Pitchfork also partnered up with UK promoters All Tomorrow's Parties for the Chicago festival, letting a few bands play an entire album the Friday night of the weekend. To attend all three days costs \$65, but these tickets disappeared by May 16.²⁹ Additionally, the two collaborate for ATP vs. Pitchfork, which took place this year from May 9–11 in England's southern countryside.³⁰ Tickets for that three-day festival started at £140 (approx. \$280 USD, including lodging). That festival sold out by March 27.³¹

The point here is not that they're putting on a concert, or even that they're inviting bands whose albums were given rave reviews. The point is that Pitchfork is making money off of these concerts.

²⁷ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 18.

²⁸ <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/news/142369-pitchfork-music-festival-2008-its-on>

²⁹ <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/news/50681-pitchfork-music-festival-three-day-passes-sold-out>

³⁰ <http://www.atpfestival.com/events/pitchfork/>

³¹ <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/page/news/49570-atp-vs-pitchfork-sells-out>

²⁴ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 122.

²⁵ "Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8." The Onion. 9/10/07. http://www.theonion.com/content/news/pitchfork_gives_music_6_8

²⁶ Wilson, L.J. "Pitchformula.com: Music criticism as a creative tool." 2003. <http://www.pitchformula.com/stats.html>



Therefore, **anything they write on their web site about the bands appearing at these festivals is not journalism – it is public relations.** They are engaging in band promotion, but only when it serves their own cause. However, what promotion they do eliminates any chance that they could ever be considered ethical journalists.

Kiera Butler visited Pitchfork's office in 2006 for *Columbia Journalism Review* to get a sense of just how the music media mogul operates on a day-to-day basis.³² She noted that their office space is humble and not very partitioned. She saw this as key to how the staff makes up its mind about a new album. They chat it up, develop a collective opinion, and then one staffer writes the review. She didn't reveal if the Pitchfork rating is actually an average of scores from multiple staff members, but it seems unlikely.

The lack of rigidity in the process might appear to be beneficial, since it would steer them from any stylistic ruts and promote a cohesive decision. But what happens when a staffer adamantly disagrees with his or her coworkers? Are they shunned until the next round of ratings? Butler makes it clear that there were "lively discussions" ensuing during her visits. Isn't that the equivalent of a raise-your-hand voting system? What's to stop one from being swayed by the person to his or her left, who either is an object of admiration, the source of paychecks, or both?

What's more, the "collective opinion" hangs around like a skin infection all over the web site. Highly rated bands are praised at every mention, accompanied by quick a pat on their own back for previous acclaim. But terms like "jam band" are treated like lepers, and bands grouped under that idiom are bashed when they appear at music festivals along with hyped bands. This reinforces their editorial voice, like a mantra slowly echoing in the minds of readers.

Dangerous

Although the hipsters obeying Pitchfork's creed are deluded to think otherwise, they are as indoctrinated and weak-minded as the slavish fans of radio pop and

³² Butler, K. "Listen to This." *Columbia Journalism Review*. May/June 2006.

American Idol. The best one-liner to address this so far appeared in The Onion's satirical jab, when they called Pitchfork's work "overwrought, masturbatory posturing intended to make insecure hipsters feel as if they're part of some imagined elite beau monde."³³ Let's explore that metaphor to the fullest potential. Pitchfork's entire operation is built upon masturbatory actions. One can practically hear a reviewer stroking while typing their ridiculous phrases.

The latest review of the Decemberists is a perfect example of this. Colin Meloy's eclectic troupe only took about four years and as many albums to reach widespread fame, but Pitchfork endorsed them all along. *Castaways and Cutouts* got an 8.1, *Her Majesty's The Decemberists* got an 8.2, and *Picaresque* got an 8.3.³⁴ They even adored *The Crane Wife*, the band's major-label debut (for the tyrannical overlords at Capitol, no less) and arguably their dullest work yet. The album did, however, reach the #35 spot on the U.S. Billboard charts.³⁵ If Pitchfork had bashed the band once they became radio stars, the website would have sacrificed the opportunity to *Capitol-ize* on the good fortune. Giving that album an 8.4 was the equivalent of blowing a load in the face of a quarter of a million people worldwide. Let's just *read between the lines* toward the end of Stephen M. Deusner's review of *The Crane Wife*.³⁶

"The Crane Wife 1 and 2' comprise a medley towards the album's end," [stroke stroke] "starting slow and soft but gradually reaching crescendo in an unfurling finale," [stroke stroke stroke] "with Meloy breaking the word 'heart' into multiple syllables over an unraveling drum beat." [stroke stroke stroke stroke] "Restrained yet resonant, the song's (and album's) climax is a remarkable moment." Rating: [ohhhhhh oh oh oohhhhhh] 8.4.

Does that come with a rag?

³³ "Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8." 9/10/07.

³⁴ http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/16936-castaways-and-cutouts.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/16934-her-majesty-the-decemberists.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/16938-picaresque.

³⁵

http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003251398

³⁶ Deusner, S.M. 10/3/06.



Now Pitchfork has even begun mocking bands. In February 2008, British Sea Power's album *Do you Like Rock Music?* received the novel rating "U.2."³⁷ Reviewer Stephen Deusner implied that the band sounded more like the *uncool* U2 of recent years, as opposed to the *trendy* U2 of the 1980s. As a result, and thanks to the convenient two-character nature of U2's name, Deusner (or maybe the whole staff – one can never be sure) took that criticism way beyond the sphere of expectations and abandoned a numbered rating. They obviously found the result amusing, but such ridicule might have eliminated the band's chance of being heard anywhere – even by those not tainted by the articles.

Bands aren't the only ones being victimized. In their review of Radiohead's 2007 album *In Rainbows*, Pitchfork gave readers the impression that one could type in whatever rating they wanted into a small javascript box atop the article.³⁸ This was a tongue-in-cheek reference to the initial fall release of the album, when fans could literally name their price – even £0.00 – to download the album as MP3s from the band's website. However, when one types in a rating on the Pitchfork review and then clicks the red question mark, it flashes "IT'S UP TO YOU." A second click on the red punctuation mark reveals, "NO REALLY, IT'S 9.3." One can practically hear their pompous laughter as they posted the review.

So what can readers do? They can avoid Pitchfork's concert reviews and top album lists, sticking only to news, features, concert reviews and interviews. But this won't really hurt the web site. Furthermore, what can bands do? Even if they refrain from sending an album in to Pitchfork, the media organization has every right to obtain a copy some other way and post a review. What's worse is that the bands *need* this type of attention to make it past the "starving artist" phase. In today's music world, an artist's development is mostly self-directed, and a band is lucky if they can make a living with only their music. Music blogs like *Gorilla vs. Bear* could help a little, since they muster a lot of

influence with very little content or action. However, more often than not, these types of blogs seek the same hype development as Pitchfork.

With that said, the website that everyone loves to hate isn't wholly to blame. Pitchfork isn't really the devil so much as it is a signifier of a devilish characteristic inside all of us. We are all relentless critics who spend a lot more time tearing creations down than building them up. That applies to the work of others, and the ideas inside of us that could potentially become artistic creations. As Palahniuk has the protagonist's mother proclaim in *Choke*, "We use criticism as a fake participation...It only looks as if we've accomplished something."³⁹

The argument here is not that criticism is wrong. Criticism is probably just as old as creation, and legions of folks have made a living as professional critics. However, **there is a direct relationship between a media organization's level of power and the caution they must exercise in their criticism.** Professional criticism calls for tact, sincerity, and humility. Pitchfork abuses their power far more often than they exercise it in a respectable manner. Stated differently, assassinations should drop proportionately as power rises. Or as Alexander Pope put it:⁴⁰

"Of all the causes which conspire to blind
Man's erring judgment and misguide the mind,
What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
Is pride, the never-failing vice of fools.
Whatever nature has in worth denied,
She gives in large recruits of needful pride;"

And more concisely:

"The critic else proceeds without remorse,
Seizes your fame, and puts his laws in force."

Pitchfork isn't creating. They're not contributing to the greater good. Their tearing apart the ones with the real bravery and courage: the artists. The bands are the ones putting their lives on the line for a dream. Pitchfork staffers sit comfortably in their Chicago office behind the

³⁷ Deusner, S.M. "Do You Like Rock Music? record review." 2/12/2008.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/48592-do-you-like-rock-music

³⁸ Pytlik, M. "In Rainbows record review." 10/15/07.
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³⁹ Palahniuk, C. 2001.

⁴⁰ Pope, A. "An Essay On Criticism."



Internet's digital mask, and rape the world with bogus reviews. They get away with it, because no one can come up with a way to eradicate them, or because no one has developed a better option. Meanwhile, they try to stifle the public's desire for a fully interactive music website, like IMBD has become for movies. But one thing is certain: Pitchfork's rule is coming to an end.

The Internet is too vast and too important to allow something so narrow and negative to exist. This is the age of Web 2.0, where everyone with an Internet connection theoretically has an equal voice. Pitchfork is simply a dinosaur that managed to evade the great asteroid death of traditional media. As quoted in the *Wired* article, Reed Parry of the Arcade Fire stated it well when he said, "Putting too much weight in somebody else's opinion of a piece of art, that is a dangerous thing. It's just a reaction. It's the last piece of the cultural puzzle, not the most important part."⁴¹

In Kovach and Rosentiel's words, "Facts are replaced instead by whatever sells—or can be sold. Spin replaces verification. Right becomes a matter of who has the greatest might—wattage, audience, rhetorical skill. In practice, unfortunately, the technological argument is the digital equivalent of tyranny, not freedom. Rather than liberated, we become captive to the technology."⁴² Of course, this statement is based on the dwindling existence of conventional media on the Internet.

One more hurdle has appeared that could make mental captivity harder to escape. On April 7, 2008, the company unveiled Pitchfork.tv, a sister web site featuring music videos, documentaries, and other audio-visual content, streaming free of charge, 24 hours per day.⁴³ The word television literally means a physical device as well as content, but this service proposes to do exactly the same thing as traditional TV. Television is, and always will be, the most passive form of media. As the world has learned since the television ownership became widespread in the '50s and '60s, the device is also the most conducive for controlling a population.

Pitchfork Media does provide a service to music lovers of the world, especially those with little former access to music or information about musicians. Although, they must change their ways and realize that only a humble approach to music news reporting will be rewarded in the long run. They need to open their eyes and see that success on today's Internet means user participation and interaction. They need to let loose their well-calculated gambling scheme of reviews.

Pitchfork is simply a dam built to hold back some of the flood that occurred earlier this decade, when independent music spilt into the general consciousness of society. If none of these suggestions are put into action, this dam will burst and the floodplain of music fans will once again be covered with the waters of musical chaos. That is, until someone new steps in to drain that wash sink and fill the real needs of passionate music fans without imposing a new tyranny.

But then again, why wait for the next flood?

**The graphic above was produced in Photoshop CS3 using one image from sxc.hu (the treble clef) and one from Wikimedia Commons (the fork). The fork was a photo by Arnold Reinhold posted under a GNU Free Documentation License, version 1.2. Access this article online at http://www.supraterranean.com/issues/issue_002/08_8_1_E_pitchfork_1.html*

⁴¹ Itzkoff, D. "The Pitchfork Effect."

⁴² Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 164.

⁴³ <http://www.pitchfork.tv>



NOTES:

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- ³ du Lac, J.F. "Giving Indie Acts A Plug, or Pulling It." *The Washington Post*. 4/30/06.
- ⁴ Pitchfork Record Reviews page.
http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/page/record_reviews
- ⁵ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. 2001. Three Rivers Press: New York. p. 85.
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- ⁷ http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/14842-moon-safari?artist_title=14842-moon-safari,
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- ⁹ du Lac. 4/30/06.
- ¹⁰ Lord Acton Wikipedia page.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton%2C_1st_Baron_Acton
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- ¹⁴ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 164.
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- ²² Itzkoff, D. "The Pitchfork Effect." *Wired*. September 2006.
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- ²⁴ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T. 2001. p. 122.
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