

Les gonzos: Music Criticism as Cultural Criticism
Jonathyne Briggs, Indiana University Northwest

In a collection of his music writings dating from the 1970s, journalist François Jouffra recognized the importance of popular music to French youth at that time: “Through musical notation, they [youth] speak to each other across continents, seeking answers to metaphysical questions. The guitar chord has become a philosophical system.”¹ By the 1970s popular music in France had become a form of expression for the ideas and ideals of the French counterculture despite, or perhaps because of, its continued reliance on foreign models and aesthetics. Perhaps then it is important to note the emergence of distinct voices in French music criticism during the early 1970s, particularly with the rapid expansion of music magazines in this period.² Among the titles included the important monthlies *Rock and Folk* and *Best*, both of which reported a great deal on popular music in France and from America and the United Kingdom. This shift towards coverage of Anglophone music mirrored a similar change in the tastes of French consumers, who increasingly during the 1970s preferred to listen to the original recordings of Anglophone artists rather than their French translations, which had constituted a large percentage of French popular music during the 1960s.³ Both magazines offered lengthy interviews with rock music’s leading stars and stories on the emerging musical trends in Britain and the States along side coverage of the French rock scene that was trying to distinguish itself. Along with such features, *Rock and Folk* and *Best* also contained columns from two notable young writers: Yves Adrien and Patrick Eudeline. These two helped articulate the meaning of rock music in France in many ways, drawing on a large repertoire of music from outside of France to explain its importance for the French. Another writer who shared many of the viewpoints of Adrien and

Eudeline, Alain Pacadis, wrote a column on popular music for *Libération* between 1975 and 1977.

In the writings of these three, one can see the importance given to popular music in describing the cultural and social conditions of seventies' France. In their eyes, music was the language of the transformed French society, although this music was represented by American artists such as Alice Cooper, the MC5, and the Stooges. The collective works of these musicians revealed the coming of what Adrien saw as a new form of music, which would later be christened punk. Although rock music was central to their style, it was with the arrival of punk and its rejection of cultural conventions that these writers explored their ideas to the fullest. Their writings share a common aesthetic that in American scholarship has been christened gonzo. Associated with Hunter S. Thompson, Lester Bangs, Richard Meltzer, Caroline Coon and Nik Cohn, gonzo journalism undermined the traditional style of reporting and criticism through the appearance of the writer as part of the story, the emphasis on internal monologue (sometimes even dialogue), the importance of humor, and tangential referencing of the supposed subject of the story. Often, gonzo writing bordered on incoherent as the author attempted to describe the sensory experience of rock music, sometimes under the influence of hallucinogens.⁴ Adrien, Eudeline, and Pacadis all serve as examples of this style in the French milieu, each emerging contemporarily with the Anglo writers during the early 1970s.

More than just rock criticism, however, their work constitutes a form of cultural criticism, a method of analyzing the social condition of postwar France. Certainly, cultural criticism has had a recognized history in the postwar period, often mapped by the sociological investigations of Edgar Morin and Henri Lefebvre, the radical approach of the Situationists, and

the famed work of Roland Barthes on mythology in popular culture.⁵ In much of the writings of these thinkers, popular music played a minor role (if any) in their investigation of French culture. In the work of Adrien, Eudeline, and Pacadis, however, popular music, especially American rock music, plays the central and organizing role in their writing as *the* form of culture through which the cultural condition of postwar France could be best understood. In this sense, they operated as intellectuals during 1970s, providing insights into the human and social condition, without, I might add, a connection to any particular schools of thought that dominated much of postwar intellectual life.⁶ This paper will examine key examples of the work of these three French gonzos to reveal connections between the history of French popular music criticism and French intellectual history during this period.

French popular music criticism developed after 1968, when underground publishing became an important part of continuing the struggles of '68. Prior to this period, most music magazines focused solely on the musical stars of French pop, Johnny Hallyday, for example. Most stories offered biographical pieces on the various stars of French song without examining the specific meaning of popular music within French culture. *Rock and Folk* began publishing in 1966 and *Best* in 1968, both of which initially covered Anglophone music, such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix, but these magazines initially followed the same pattern as previous publications. Even in countercultural newspapers, such as *Actuel*, where music coverage was given space, music criticism lacked a distinct voice to articulate music's meaning, which the gonzos would provide.

Yves Adrien began his career as a writer for the Parisian underground paper *Parapluie* and he immediately addressed the tensions in French society in his columns. In the May 1972

issue, his “Front du Libération du Rock” article used rock music to discuss the deleterious effects of consumerism on French society. Rock music provided an object of study to formulate a critique of consumerism. Adrien observes that, “in France, rock is Janus-faced: one is hideous while the other has an untamed beauty.” For him, the first example of rock serves as a “seductive method for power to introduce itself in the marketplace” and is ultimately the “triumph of all that is vegetative.” The second case offers France a “spark of life.”⁷ Rejecting the state of French music as “pop,” Adrien underscored the importance of rock music in personal liberation, a great concern for French philosophers of the seventies. The distinction between rock and pop was a common way of understanding popular music in France shared by most critics of this period.⁸ In his article, Adrien also recognized how popular music could serve as a form of power, in many ways sharing the notions expressed in the famous essay by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry.”⁹ Approaching from an intellectual vector informed by Marxist thought, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School were seemingly fellow travelers as many intellectuals in France. However, with the possible exception of Herbert Marcuse, the Frankfurt School thinkers were largely ignored by the French.¹⁰ Still Adrien’s piece shows an engagement with the ideas of cultural criticism. In their work though, Horkheimer and Adorno discounted the value of all popular culture as expression of the false consciousness of the market and mass politics. Therefore, an important difference is the salvational role that rock music could play in Adrien’s mind, as a method of escaping the falseness of consumerism. The untamed nature of rock music would provide a method of personal revolt and liberation, although Adrien offers little description in this piece as to what this untamed music might sound like.

By 1973, Adrien had become a regular columnist for *Rock and Folk*, the music monthly edited by Philippe Manoeuvre, who himself was a music journalist. It was in his work for this magazine that Adrien outlined the beautiful other face of rock. “Je chante le rock électrique” offers a brief history of rock and roll music, that “savage thing,” and emphasizes the importance of groups such as the Who, the Rolling Stones, and the New York Dolls in reflecting the attitudes of French youth. If pop was the embrace of emptiness, rock and roll symbolized for him the irreconcilable dialectic of consumer culture, what Adrien called the “Pink Cadillac.”¹¹ Moreover, rock and roll was a form of liberation to lose the persistent illusions of the French Left.¹² Certainly the French intellectual community continued to debate the validity of Leftist utopian thought during the 1970s; the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in 1973 is often cited as a turning point in postwar French thought. Marxism had retained a strong hold over French intellectuals when Solzhenitsyn’s work forced a reappraisal of Marxism among many on the political left.¹³ Yet Adrien, seeing politics through a pair of Ray-Bans, had already surmised the problems that the French Left had with the fantasies of teenagers, and he sided with the teenagers against ideology.

Adrien continued to write for *Rock and Folk* in his column “Trash” and began writing for the art journal *Façade* as well in 1977. His articles reveal a growing interest with new conceptions of selfhood and the transformation of human consciousness, which again he saw rock music as an expression of.¹⁴ He began to formulate his thoughts into a longer work that would examine the shifting in the modern experience that came with the punk aesthetic. Punk was as much an intellectual exercise as a musical genre, and many French music critics were interested in the value of punk.¹⁵ Adrien had embraced punk early on, citing American groups

such as the Doors and the Stooges as early punks in his articles and taking the name “Sweet Punk” as his nom de plume. Adrien saw the importance of reinvention in postmodern society and investigated how the consumption of rock music created a new way of looking at the world, a perception he termed “növoision.” In his 1979 work of the same title, Adrien travels from France to Britain to the United States, writing from his various hotel rooms. *Növoision* chronicles Adrien’s drift through Western culture at the end of the 1970s, as the initial punk movement began to fade and Adrien tries to describe the new social role that emerges in the wake of punk, the novo, which is to be so human that one becomes a machine.¹⁶ Növoision is the realization of human evolution, the recognition of the machine within man and the acceptance of this paradox. The connection between man and machine had long been part of the French intellectual tradition, but during the 1970s the writings of Deleuze and Guattari specifically theorized how humans needed to release themselves as “desiring machines” to recreate the social order.

Again, Adrien provides a narrative for this idea and again stresses the central role of music in releasing inner desire. In the work, Adrien hobnobs with the musicians of the new wave scenes in Britain and the US, drinks, smokes and takes various drugs, and has a loving relationship with his television, all in an effort to discover this new consciousness needed for the coming age. The collision of styles in the music of post-punks such as Throbbing Gristle, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, and the B-52’s represents the new type of culture that matches the new world being built at the end of the seventies.¹⁷ His love affair with his television reveals how Adrien attempts to reconcile the paradoxes of artifice and experience that were crucial to the punk movement. Adrien ultimately sees himself as a guinea pig [un cobaye] for

the coming society promised within the music of the late 1970s. Adrien's writings engage with the philosophical ideas of the period but shine these ideas through the prism of Anglophone pop music to illuminate its critical role in seventies France.

Patrick Eudeline was Adrien's contemporary. Both were part of a cohort of French punks who were inhabitants of the Open Market record store in Paris, often seen as the initial locus of the French punk movement.¹⁸ By the end of 1973, Eudeline was a writer for *Best*, the rival magazine of *Rock and Folk*. Eudeline had a regular column, "New Age," from which he issued his observations on the importance of rock music. For Eudeline, rock music had two functions—a method of fun and means of reinvention—and that it ultimately was the "most beautiful gift that the absurd twentieth century gave to the children of the seventies."¹⁹

Sharing Adrien's appreciation for rock's power of reinvention, Eudeline would give to his French readers his monthly observations on emerging subcultures in Britain and the United States. The sound of American music during the 1970s encapsulated the tension between the world of consumption and the alienation of modern life; as Eudeline asserts that rock music could "disguise the real, be fake, marvelously fake and artificial: commercial, Plexiglas, covered in plastic."²⁰ Eudeline's celebration of the artificiality of rock as the method of its power echoes the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, whose work on consumer society emphasizes the importance of the image and imagination in obscuring reality. Baudrillard's conclusions of the simulacra of the marketplace as a form of truth are shared by Eudeline in his work on rock and roll music.²¹ Moreover, Baudrillard's theories are often based upon his observations of American culture (for example, Disneyland), or perhaps the recognition of the breakdown between national cultures, a view also evident in Eudeline's writings.

Eudeline was not limited to reporting on rock music; embracing the gonzo style, he formed his own group, Asphalt Jungle, in 1976. The punk music scene had developed in France by this time and several foreign groups had already come to perform in Paris, for example the Sex Pistols before their brush with infamy. While performing, Eudeline drafted a work that combined his views on rock music with his hopes for the revolutionary potential of punk, 1977's *L'aventure punk*. Capturing the negation of punk, Eudeline asserts punk's critical value in rejecting 'old Europe' and asserts the importance of desire in the new consumer society. "The economic conditions have changed [and it is] more a question of leisure, of access to consumption...the only path open [to young people]: rock and roll."²² Again, desire was a concern for many philosophers; for Guattari and Deleuze it was an expression of power against the normalizing attitudes of contemporary society.²³ Eudeline notes the central theme in punk and rock and roll in general is the voicing of desire, revealing the shared ideas between the gonzos and the intellectuals.

Alain Pacadis serves as the third member in the troika of French *gonzos*. Writing for *Libération* starting in 1975, Pacadis appears as the most likely of the three to be linked with French intellectual history, as he completed a thesis on dialectical materialism in philosophy.²⁴ His column, "White Flash," Pacadis regularly reviewed records and concerts and interviewed several musicians. In many ways, he followed a similar path as Adrien and Eudeline in his writings by providing a narrative for the history of rock and roll music in a number of articles. Tellingly, he emphasized the political power of rock music, stating that "the [rock] musician lives in a battle...one does not think of Karl Marx or any other political theorist...still the musicians serves his audience as the amplifier for their revolt."²⁵ Much like the other gonzos,

he points to the position of rock music outside of ideology. Evoking the concerns of Adrien and Eudeline on consumerism, Pacadis offers criticism of the music industry in France as silencing the subversive sounds of rock music. Perhaps due to this reality, Pacadis, like the other gonzos, stresses the importance of American and British rock music in keeping this possibility alive among French listeners who are “bored while waiting for the revolution.”²⁶

Pacadis often engaged with philosophy in his articles. Addressing his interpretation of the Marxist variant of the Hegelian dialectic, Pacadis argues a different tack than Adrien. Rather than the irreconcilable part of the dialectic, for Pacadis rock and roll was instead the “final point of dialectical materialism, the limit, the moment of fusion with the real,” which was already evident in the music of Gene Vincent, the Flamin’ Groovies, and French punk Elodie Lauten.²⁷ He also rejects rock and roll’s connection with May ’68, since he believes that those militants misunderstood the connection between rock and revolt. Pacadis’s interpretation ran against the grain of French Marxist thought in the postwar period, which became increasingly skeptical of the so-called premature closure of the dialectic and the meaning of popular culture.²⁸ Pacadis’s celebration of rock and roll as the “living revolution” serves as another critique of Marxist thought, which coming under question as the Communist Party in France had shifted away from its revolutionary program as a part of the development of Eurocommunism during the seventies.

Influenced by Adrien, Pacadis kept a journal of his life during 1976 and 1977, the pivotal years of punk in France, covering the Paris subculture of musicians, artists, and writers as Pacadis drank his way through a series of interviews. *Un jeune home chic* [A nice young man] paints the Parisian scene as an example of the reinvention of the world. Pacadis was a crucial

part of this scene as an observer and participant, as he reveled in punk's attack on boredom. In his journal, he attends parties, film opening, and numerous concerts in Paris, which for him constitute the rebuilding of French society to match the reality of postwar life and suggest the continued dynamism in the artistic life of Paris. As a longtime member of the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR),²⁹ Pacadis had had connections to the French *gauchistes* but for him the liberation and freedom sought by gays in seventies France came through music, although for Pacadis rock music was an open-ended idea incorporating all styles, including punk, rock and roll, and disco. It was in the discothèques and at the concerts that one could fully express one's self, again asserting that was music the "living revolution" that the gonzos all claimed it to be.

The rejection of ideology in favor of popular music among the gonzo parallels a larger development in French intellectual history in the 1970s. The failure of the events of 1968 to transform French society led many thinkers to examine how political power should be understood and challenged on an individual level, and the group labeled the New Philosophers focused on these very concerns in the late 1970s. A loosely organized group that included Bernard-Henri Lévy, Andre Glucksmann, and Maurice Clavel, the New Philosophers rejected Marxism due to its relationship with totalitarianism and sought both a more liberal approach and the end of ideology.³⁰ The gonzos shared many of these ideas but again heard the liberating potential for society in sound of rock music, whereas most philosophers shied away from popular culture.

The gonzos continued to write following the collapse of the punk scene in France in 1978, but the tone of their writing changed to a more traditional form of reporting. While their

observations and opinions still surfaced, the revolutionary power and intellectual approach that were apparent during the seventies faded into the background. Nevertheless, their writings from the earlier period suggest that their work on music mirrored the ideas of French intellectuals of the 1970s and moreover sought to articulate them through rock and roll music. Although Patrick Eudeline himself warned of the French tendency to over-intellectualize, his work and that of his fellow gonzos provides evidence of such intellectual thought.³¹

¹ François Jouffra, *La Culture Pop des années 70: Le pop-notes de François Jouffra* (Paris: Spengler, 1994), 124.

² Emmanuelle Debaussart, 'La Malediction No. 7', *30 Years of Rock and Folk* special issue, 1997: 40.

³ C. Bertrand and F. Bordat, *Les Médias américaines en France: Influence et penetration* (Paris: Belin, 1989), 115.

⁴ Anita Thompson had provided a 'guide' to the gonzo style of writing, based solely on the works of Hunter S. Thompson. See Anita Thompson, *The Gonzo Way: A Celebration of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (Golden, Col.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2007). For examples of gonzo writing, see Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, Greil Marcus, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); Nik Cohn, *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: The Golden Age of Rock* (New York: Grove Press, 2001 [1972]); Caroline Coon, *1988: The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion* (London: Hawthorn Books, 1977); and Richard Meltzer, *A Whore Just Like the Rest: The Music Writings of Richard Meltzer* (New York: Da Capo, 2000).

⁵ Edgar Morin, *L'esprit des temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1962); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1991); Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Ken Knabb, trans. (London: Aldgate Press, 1983); and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

⁶ On the intellectual climate of the 1970s, see Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Movement of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn, 2004).

⁷ Yves Adrien, "Front du Libération du Rock," *Parapluie* 7 (May 1972), 9.

⁸ See Henri Torgue, *La Pop Music* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975).

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Gunzelin Noerr, ed., Edmund Jecpott, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 94-136.

¹⁰ Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), xv

-
- ¹¹ Yves Adrien, "Je chante le rock électrique," *Rock and Folk* 73 (January 1973), 36.
- ¹² Ibid., 38.
- ¹³ Sunil Khilnani, "The End of Ideology and the Critique of Marxism," *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Lawrence Kritzman, Brian Reilly, and M.B. DeBevoise, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 191.
- ¹⁴ Yves Adrien, "Je préfère le Nucléaire au Rousseauisme," *Façade* 6 (1977), 11.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Stéphane Pietri and Alexis Quinlin, *Punk: Seventeen Rock* (Paris: Regine Deforges, 1978); and Brierre, Jean-Dominique, and Ludwik Lewin. *Punkitude*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1978.
- ¹⁶ Yves Adrien, *Növovision: Les confessions d'un Cobaye du siècle* (Paris: Humanoïdes Associés/ Speed 17), 1980), 11-2.
- ¹⁷ On post-punk music, see Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
- ¹⁸ Christian Eudeline, *Nos années punk, 1972-1978* (Paris: Denoël, 2002).
- ¹⁹ Patrick Eudeline, "Fun: Qui sont ces nouvelles gloires de la scène adolescente," *Best* 75 (October 1973), reprinted in Patrick Eudeline, *Gonzo: Écrits rock 1973-2001* (Paris: Denoël, 2002), 633.
- ²⁰ Patrick Eudeline, "De Ricky Nelson à Todd Rundgren ou des ice-creams tièdes aux doigts qui claquent," *Best* 66 (January 1974), in *Gonzo*, 379.
- ²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Glazer, trans. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
- ²² Patrick Eudeline, *L'aventure punk* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1977), 43.
- ²³ On *Anti-Oedipus*, see Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, (McGill-Queen University Press, 2007), chapter 10.
- ²⁴ Alain Pacadis, *Un jeune homme chic* (Paris: Denoël, 2002), 12.
- ²⁵ Alain Pacadis, "White Flash: Rock and révolte, entretien avec un musicien," *Libération* (December 12, 1975) reprinted in *Nightclubbing*, 113.
- ²⁶ Pacadis, "White Flash: (Just another dream) ou des mérites comparés du Marxisme et de l'acide," *Libération* (January 16, 1976) in *Nightclubbing*. 120.
- ²⁷ Pacadis, "White Flash: Le point final du matérialisme dialectique," *Libération* (January 30, 1976) in *Nightclubbing*, 124.
- ²⁸ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 297.

²⁹ Frederic Martel, *The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France Since 1968*, Jane Marie Todd, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 160.

³⁰ Christofferson, *French Intellectuals*, chapter 5.

³¹ Eudeline, *L'aventure*, 67.