On continually refining what y do

Author and journalist Jessica Hopper discusses revisiting past projects, truth-telling, and learning more about her own work through the work of her community of writers.

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As told to Caitlin Wolper Phillips, 2015 words.

Tags: Journalism, Writing, Music, Editing, Identity, Process, Mentorship, Politics.

You're re-releasing an expanded and revised edition of *The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic*, which you first published in 2015. Why did you decide to revisit it?

There were things that I wanted to add. Things that I wanted to take out. Things I wanted to correct. Things had changed for me as a writer, as an author, as a thinker.

When I was initially putting the first edition together, there were men that I worked with and men in my life—I say men because it was only men—who would say, "Wow, you think you're ready for this? Isn't it a little early in your career?" Someone close to me, advising: "Well, you don't want to put any new stuff in there by saying your things that came out last year are classic already."

I was sort of afraid that when it came out, people would be like, "That's so egotistical." I had spent so much of my career in these extremely patriarchal and even misogynist trenches of music journalism, the music industry, scenes that were run by white men and so much of their thinking and value system—as much as I disregarded it, I had internalized it. I had worked really hard, and I had come to fear that somehow what I had done would be invalidated or taken away.

I worked in a lot of places where I was really held up as the exceptional woman or the only woman. That instills something in you that you've got to do this "the right way." which is funny, because I spent my entire career to that point basically upsetting people. Those two things were at war within me always when I was writing. I was very much always writing to rid myself of that poison, to refute it.

I see [my early writing] now as forever trying to change the minds of men with power. Writing with them as my audience. That had started to change some by 2014, 2015. It's one of those really poisonous ideas that lingered in my editorial mind. I couldn't voice them. I wasn't talking about stuff like that in interviews the first time around.

[Meeting my audience] really liberated me to make a new book that was true to myself, and true to the audience I had come to know. Something that was in dialogue with them, and not this old framework or idea. Not these old men and tragic young men that I had just been surrounded by my whole career.

I have to assume a good deal of confidence comes with meeting your audience. How would you say that your awareness of them manifested in the book?

I chose to put in more recent work that I thought was important. The Björk piece. The *Rolling Stone* Women piece. As I've gotten older I've been interested in history and in the way that white patriarchal music culture really seeks to flatten certain people's work, and specifically cut off the wisdom and the knowledge base of older women in particular in music. Which is reflective of culture at large. And what is lost in that, and also the sort of truths people can tell when they feel like they have nothing left to lose. This is why it was really important for me to include that Björk piece, include that *Rolling Stone* Women piece, include the Lido Pimienta piece. To have something that was more holistic. I took out some of the bad reviews.

Bad reviews as in poorly-written, or harsh on the work?

There was a section in the first book called Bad Reviews. I think they got at the attitude and texture of my earlier writing.

How the book is now, I am more interested in having the wisdom and the path-breaking that these women and their art offers, and examples, and things that I think have real libratory power. I think it's really important to be connected with history. Some of the pieces are…it's almost like they're the director's cut version, restored version. I went back and added stuff back in that I'd excised in the previous book.

There's a line in the Warped Tour piece where I talk about how I was on the tour with my boyfriend at the time, who was a musician. I was always really ooky about having that in, because for years and years and years and years, until I was married with kids, I got this, "Oh, you're here because you're a groupie," or "You're here to meet dudes in bands." I didn't want my work to be discredited. I wanted the piece to be its true self, and to be unashamed about who and how I am, even when it—there's some stuff in there where I was a younger me who wasn't my, real air—quotes here—enlightened self.

The other thing is restoring and returning these pieces to some of their original forms, or wording, and a few places I have some footnotes. Sometimes, to be published, I had to corral or cut off parts of pieces, frame them around what obviously my editor thought was not just valid points, but, often times, *their* worldview and filter…People told me my arguments about feminism and my lived experience with music had to be quote-unquote bulletproof. By that, they meant it had to be understandable to them, someone who'd never experienced it. I'm really grateful to now have the space to honor my younger self, and also write out a place of clarity.

How have you perceived music journalism since 2015, since you initially published *The First Collection*? Do you feel like the industry's changed as a fairly patriarchal system?

After Viacom nuked MTV news, I was really scared and sad. MTV News was not without some substantial issues. [Disclosure: We both worked at MTV News.] We always used to say we're like the lamprey on the back of the Viacom shark—maybe we get 15 or 17 months out of this.

There were so many things about editing and writing there, working in such incredible company. I learned so much about just being a better writer, and putting more heart in my work by editing Carvell Wallace, and Hanif Abdurraqib every week. A constant raising of the bar. Getting to do some incredible stuff. Being in great, enthusiastic company. After that ending there, it just blew all the fuses. I was like, I don't know if I can do this again.

I was really heartbroken after all that stuff happened. And until last summer, with three, four exceptions, every freelance piece that came to me from editors was a Me Too story, generic or specific, something people wanted me to investigate. A woman who'd been fired after being a whistleblower, or a piece about a rapist. I was starting to sense I was a very box-checking presence, and that also, people were only calling me. I started referring people to a lot of other writers— there's a lot of other perspectives. I certainly took up a lot of space in that world for a long time, and I wanted those opportunities I had for other people.

But to answer your question—for a long time, I looked most the men around me—and to be sure it was mostly men who were in music journalism—and I saw a certain path. They write for these magazines, and then they have a job as a music critic someplace, and that job doesn't go away. They achieve something and they stay there. I don't know if

that system exists for anyone but those men. I think that's starting to change in the last couple years. There's more critics of color. There's more folks who historically have not had voices within these institutions of journalism.

I started doing music criticism when I was 15. I didn't even know of any people of color working in music criticism, other than Greg Tate and Tricia Rose. I knew about people that wrote at *The Village Voice*, and I knew about some people who I read about in *Rock She Wrote*, which had just come out then. Everyone that I knew who wrote about music, it was about 90% white men, and all my editors were white men of a certain age. Most of them are still employed as editors and writers, they still have careers. The women who were writing that around that time, either they left, or are in academia, or they're Ann Powers.

It is a blessedly different world in some ways. I think things will change even more. For me, I don't want to build anything for any corpo-bro, problematic entity. Which in some ways leaves me without a whole lot of paths. I'm okay with that! I'm continuing to build other things. I don't want to be part of systems that dehumanize writers, or people working within it.

What do you think is a hallmark of something you would call good criticism?

Good criticism has integrity. It has a distinct point of view, and it invites people into the work. And if you'd asked me this seven years ago I would have had a different answer.

Who do you look to right now? What specific writers?

Hanif's a whole revolution in music journalism—these incredible bounds of astuteness and tenderness. The way his work invites people in is continually a revelation for me. It helps me unlearn some of the school of criticism that I came from. It's helped me disregard some things that I think are not useful in my writing, which is "always be right," and an invulnerability that's macho and comes from that old *CREEM* school: "I'm right, even when I'm wrong." There's a snobbiness about that which I've been trying to shake that loose for a decade. I'm so grateful for his work. For Carvell's work. Doreen [St. Félix]. Everything Doreen writes, of course.

Rebecca Solnit, of course. Rebecca Solnit's memoir, *Recollections of My Non-Existence*, helped me understand new ways of coming into my work. It was definitely an influence on the afterword of this new book. Especially the truth-telling that she does in her book about how much rape culture has informed the point of view she takes in her writing. It sung to me. In a way it felt like a new song about my own work. It gave me an ability to be honest about the forces that have impacted my work and my point of view, like working in an industry where so many people are being abused, where people didn't feel safe. It allowed me to able to say, "I don't feel safe either, and here's why," and how that influences my writing.

In my afterword, I write about talking to some of my peers, meaning dudes who do the same thing that I do for a living, about the experience of going to a show. They're not speed-walking home, down the middle of the street afterwards. They don't know what it is to have to do that because you had to stay to see the whole set because you're reviewing it, and the band did two encores, so it's straight-up 2 a.m., and you're a woman by yourself. Speed-walking home down the middle of the street, checking over their shoulder is not part of their professional concert-going experience. That's how Solnit shows up. In my being able to truth-tell *that* as part of my experience.

Jessica Hopper Recommends:

Five current most-played albums:

The Trinity Session — Cowboy Junkies

The Hissing of Summer Lawns — Joni Mitchell

Lianne La Havas — Lianne La Havas

Dream Chimes: Wind Chimes in the Australian Bush — Australian Nature Sounds

The Bandsplain Podcast: “That’s not a record, but we’re just going to count it.”

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