1/26/24 / Music’s Pitchfork in the road

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

ERIC HARVEY (associate professor, Grand Valley State University): My name is Eric Harvey. I'm an associate professor in the School of Communications at Grand Valley State University.

SCORING <Time by Pink Floyd>

ERIC: But I've also been writing for the website *Pitchfork* since 2007.

SCORING POST

ERIC: In 2023, I wrote the biggest article of my career for *Pitchfork*, a Sunday review of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*.

SCORING POST

ERIC: I spent about 5 or 6 months researching and writing and editing the review. I submitted it to Pitchfork, and then they published it with a score of 9.3 out of 10. And then all hell broke loose.

SCORING POST

ERIC: I got more emails and social media feedback than anything I'd ever written by a lot. Half of them were laudatory or congratulatory, and the other half were asking me: “Where the hell are the other 0.7 points?”

SCORING POST

ERIC: That, to me, is *Pitchfork*.

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): On *Today, Explained*: the agony and ecstasy of *Pitchfork*. And how we’ll discover music without it.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Rameswaram. About a week ago, Conde Nast laid off a ton of people at *Pitchfork*. And in the days since everyone’s been writing these obituaries for what was maybe the most influential music publication on the internet, from *Rolling Stone* to the *New York Times* to *Vulture*.

CRAIG JENKINS (*Vulture* culture critic): My name is Craig Jenkins. Music critic at *New York Magazine*, *Vulture*, uh, what else?

SEAN: Craig Jenkins wrote the one at *Vulture*.

CRAIG: <laughs> You know, 2021 Pulitzer nominee for criticism, and all-around annoying person on the internet for a good 15 years going. <laughs>

SEAN: Craig’s being humble. He was a Pulitzer *finalist*. He also used to write for *Pitchfork*.

CRAIG: I wrote a lot of the rap coverage, the reviews from 2013 to 2016. I've written about Drake:

*<CLIP> RAP SOUNDBOARD: Young Money.*

CRAIG: Kendrick Lamar:

*<CLIP> KENDRICK LAMAR, “HUMBLE”: Yea! Yea!*

CRAIG: Earl Sweatshirt, Tyler, the Creator.

*<CLIP> TYLER, THE CREATOR - “SEE YOU AGAIN”: Ok ok ok ok ok ok ok ok.*

CRAIG: Childish Gambino.

*<CLIP> CHILDISH GAMBINO, “REDBONE”: DAYLIGHT!*

CRAIG: The Migos.

*<CLIP> MIGOS, “VERSACE (CLEAN VERSION)”*

CRAIG: Whatever was new and interesting… <fade down>

SEAN: For the uninitiated, we asked Craig to explain what made this site exceptional.

CRAIG: What you saw in *Pitchfork* was a matter of perspective. For fans, it was a music discovery factory, where you could find out about great or terrible art, inside and outside the mainstream field. And you could click around. You could check the good reviews. You could check interesting interviews. You could find out about news that was not getting, you know, published everywhere. There were a lotta cracks in the coverage up till the 90s … at the prestige outlets, there was a lot of stuff that they weren't able to catch or even interested in. There was antagonism towards certain genres. There was just a lot of real estate for someone to come in and have a different perspective on what was going on in music at the time. And you know, a lot of people did. I don't want to give the one site that credit, but for whatever reason, that was the one that, well, you know, it was persistence, A, and B brashness good and bad <laughs>...

SEAN: <laughs>

CRAIG: … that, you know, it turns them into the one that the most people read, argue with, fight with the most. But There is a very strong chance that you might have heard about Arcade Fire, Death Cab for Cutie, Modest Mouse. LCD Soundsystem. You know, just think of any indie staple that's been around since the 2000s, the huge stuff that wasn't on the radio, a lot of it came up through there, and a lot of it was championed there first.

SEAN: So yeah, it wasn't just *Pitchfork*. There were a bunch of other websites doing this work, like, like, *Stereogum* or even like The Onion’s *A.V. Club* or –

CRAIG: *Pop Matters*. There were so many.

SEAN: Mm. I mean, and also another thing that was very unique about Pitchfork was that it had this 0.0 to 10.0 decimal rating system, which led to people making fun of it, of course, satirizing it. I remember *The Onion* once said, “Pitchfork gives music a 6.8”.

*<CLIP> HERPY DERPINGTON, SICK BURN*

CRAIG: Classic write-up.

SEAN: <laughs> Do you have any favorite reviews or ones that you can quote, that, that sort of give you a sense of what it was like to be in this world?

CRAIG: Yeah, I've been thinking about *The Eminem Show* review that's a mock email thread. The Daft Punk remix album review that's a comic strip, in part.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CRAIG: The write up of *Party Traumatic*, the debut album by the band Black Kids, is just a picture of puppies and a one word apology for hyping the EP.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CRAIG: In addition to being, you know, an outlet where you could celebrate oddball musical geniuses like, you know, Isaac Brock from Modest Mouse or whatever, the site did a good bit of deconstructing, reconstructing, sort of the very concept of a review. And so the kind of the story is, it spends a long time tearing the idea apart, and then a long time playing tower defense and fortifying itself when it becomes the big fish.   
  
SEAN: Mmm.

CRAIG: And you know, a lot of people hated the expansion into more traditional coverage, but personally, I saw opportunities to get really granular about popular music at the same time as, you know, just weighing, you know, whatever indie stuff I don't think my friends are yelling about enough. You know, looking back at stuff that I wrote that I feel, like, very proud of. The Kendrick Lamar *To Pimp a Butterfly* review.

SCORING <”Alright” - Kendrick Lamar>

CRAIG: Kendrick Lamar's major label albums play out like spike Lee films in miniature. In both artists’ worlds, the stakes are unbearably high, the characters' motives are unclear and the morality is knotty. But there is a central force you can feel steering every moment.

SCORING BUMP

CRAIG: The good hair and bad hair – I agree with this, still –   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CRAIG: The good hair, bad hair musical routines from Spike Lee's 1988 feature *School Daze* depicted black women grappling with colourism.

*<CLIP> “SCHOOL DAZE”, RACHEL MEADOWS: It ain’t even real!*

*JANE TOUSSAINT: You wish you had hair like this.*

*RACHEL: Girl you know you weren’t even born with blue eyes. Blue contact lenses….*

*JANE: You’re just jealous.*

*RACHEL: Jealous?!*

CRAIG: It's the biggest get of my career at the time. But for people who are looking at it from a different perspective, they're upset about, you know, a 0.2 decimal score difference from what they wanted. You couldn't write about this at *Pitchfork*, like, ten years, five years prior, nobody was trying to hear it.  
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
CRAIG: Nobody was there to cover it.   
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
CRAIG: Nobody was there to … so like when I, when I like, yeah, I wanted to get a certain voice in there and, really crushed about the fact that a lot of those voices are possibly, potentially not going to be there anymore.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Tell me what is going on with Pitchfork now that we've kind of established what this website was and why it meant so much to people.

CRAIG: Well, so it's been folded into GQ and it seems like a lot of people have been laid off, you know, a lot of foundational staff and editors. It is still pumping out news and reviews. So I am loath to call it dead necessarily. But it seems like there's not going to be the lists, and the features there were, a lot of the stuff that really kept people chatting in there. It seems like it's going to pump out reviews, maybe underneath a GQ banner, which is trippy because this was built on shooting at that kind of thing, was built on having, you know, no regard for, for the big mainstream media stuff almost being in opposition to it. And it's like, can you have 25 years in this biz without it turning out that way?

SEAN: Yeah, it feels like a lot of people are mourning the loss of something, even though it's maybe not quite gone yet. Why do you think that is?

CRAIG: I realized over a long week of trying to figure out what my next step would be if I got clapped that I was mourning a version of myself, a way of thinking, a sense of adventure and a, you know, just like a learning about things in ways that I wasn't before. And that's what I miss. I miss that era of things in general.

SEAN: Mm.

CRAIG: I'm reflecting on, on what I was like in 2003 and what it was like to, like, find out about all this stuff that nobody knew about, to, to argue with friends about pop records and indie rock at the same time. The kinds of conversations that were forcing this did this website was not, I don't want to say it was central to, but that were happening around it in that it was weaving in and out of.

SEAN: But you still have the kind of job that people who love music and music criticism dream of. I know when I see you tweet like “I wrote about SZA,” “I wrote about Mac Miller,” “I wrote about John Brion,” I typically have to stop what I'm doing to read what you wrote, but this feels like a dying relationship that people have with music criticism. And it feels like platforms like Spotify, for example, want to make y'all completely obsolete by having the robots do all the work of music recommendation. How does that make you feel?

CRAIG: Being that I have yet to run into the suggestion algorithm, that quite gets me.

SEAN: <laughs>

CRAIG: Like, they can decide if I'm a 70 year old man or a 20 year old teenager. And like, I love to be in that slippery position with them. So, you know, I'm happy for whoever it works for. But just if you're really like a serious music nerd like this, you're going to find this stuff lacking. I feel like, another thing that I've been thinking a lot about lately is this notion that people don't need critics anymore because they can just go listen to the record. Do you know how long records are like, do you want to take 70 minutes to figure out if the new Drake is good?   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CRAIG: Or do you want to take five and talk to a trusted guy? You know, like, I don't necessarily buy all the notions about the lay of the land. And I think that there's still a value for discourse. If artists are cussing out their critics and the fans are, you know, using review scores as trophies, certainly something matters to somebody somewhere.

SCORING <”8 am in Charlotte” - Drake>

CRAIG: I feel like there's still life left in it and there's still interest left in it, and there's sort of amazing music happening all the time that deserves attention. So I'm going to be fighting for that as long as anybody lets me. That's how I feel about it. And when they stop, then I'll be, I don't know, writing about whatever else. Writing is transferable, kids. Remember that.

SEAN: Amen.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: When we’re back on *Today, Explained*. The next generation of music recommendations. The rise of the machines. The singularity. All that jazz.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> OASIS, “WONDERWALL”: Today is gonna be –   
 FORMER TEX ENGINEER EFIM SHAPIRO: Explained  
 OASIS: – to you.*

SEAN: First we had the radio. And magazines. Then we had websites like Pitchfork. And then Spotify showed up to tell you what to listen to. Reporter Ashley Carman wrote about how the world’s biggest music platform is changing how we discover bops for Bloomberg News. We asked her to start in the age before AI.

ASHLEY CARMAN (*Bloomberg* reporter): So Spotify comes to the US in 2011.

*<CLIP> CBS GOOD MORNING: So how do you characterize Spotify, is it a musical application, is it a social media? What is it?  
SPOTIFY CEO DANIEL EK: Well, it’s really a music app.  
CBS: Yeah.   
EK: But we think music is the most social thing there is, so it’s probably a bit of both.*

SCORING <“Bodak Yellow (Instrumental)” - Cardi B>

ASHLEY: This is the time of piracy. People are downloading music for free. They're not buying CDs. People have iPods, they're just downloading songs like crazy. And the music industry is really in a time of crisis. Spotify’s bet here was that they could get people to pay for subscriptions that are ad-free. And they can get essentially like access to the world's history of music.

*<CLIP> EK: What we tried to do with Spotify – and the goal – is create a service that’s actually better than piracy. It was simpler. It’s easier for people to discover and share music. It’s really all that.*

ASHLEY: In 2015, Spotify debuts RapCaviar, which is this flagship playlist that is supposed to really define hip hop in that moment.

*<CLIP> EX RAP CAVIAR CURATOR TUMA BASA: The concept was basically, kind of like, being like SportsCenter. These are the highlights of the culture.*

ASHLEY: And so that year, you know, Rap Caviar takes off, it starts soaring in popularity, and eventually a couple years later, Cardi B's success is eventually attributed to this playlist.   
  
SEAN: Hm!   
  
ASHLEY: Her team said this, actually, in a Vulture piece…

SEAN: Heyyyy.

ASHLEY: “A song goes in Rap Caviar, and everyone pays attention.”   
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
ASHLEY: This was for her single “Bodak Yellow”.

SCORING: LYRICS IN, UP + OUT

ASHLEY: So Rap Caviar reaches the point where without even radio support, artists are breaking, they're becoming huge superstars. And it's all because of Spotify's editorial placements.

SEAN: The certainty here throughout this timeline seems to be that nothing lasts forever. What upsets the dominance of Rap Caviar?

ASHLEY: A few things. In Spotify world, Spotify starts shifting people towards these personalized playlists. So you might remember when Discover Weekly came on the scene.

*<CLIP> SPOTIFY AD - DISCOVER WEEKLY: Discover Weekly. Every week, you get a personalized playlist of new songs that you’ve never heard before…*

ASHLEY: Like that was a big phenomenon that people love, and I think people still do love.

SEAN: Mm.

ASHLEY: Essentially they've just pushed people towards personalized playlists that are a bit more attuned to their specific tastes, rather than a one-size-fits all of a catchall genre or category. But also, I mean, one thing that's important to note, just in the broader kind of music consumption landscape is that during the pandemic, so, you know, we're talking 2020 here, TikTok totally takes off.

*<CLIP> “RENEGADE”, UNDER*

ASHLEY: And TikTok is obviously very algorithmically curated. It's not necessarily an outright music streaming platform, obviously, but music is so innately built into that app that people really start to discover music through it.

*<CLIP> “RENEGADE” UP, OUT*

SEAN: Hm. And people at Spotify are paying attention to this change?

ASHLEY: I don't know that we could say how much TikTok specifically pushed them along, but personalization is kind of a buzzword that Spotify has long tracked. And even going back to 2020 again, the CEO of Spotify, Daniel Ek, he mentioned personalization on an earnings call. And he was saying …

*<CLIP> EK, EARNINGS CALL: As we’re getting better and better at personalization, we’re serving better and better content, and more and more of our users are choosing that.*

ASHLEY: So you can really see this acknowledgment of the shift beginning, I mean, outright, completely in 2020. But I am sure it happened before then as well.

SEAN: So what is this dominant figure in the music curation marketplace space doing now? What are their latest innovations?

ASHLEY: So the biggest thing they're doing is they're starting to shift towards AI playlists. They, they debuted a playlist called AI DJ last year.

SEAN: <laughs> Wh-wh-wh-wh-what?

ASHLEY: And the idea is, yeah, they use generative AI that was trained on one of their employees actually to kind of like DJ a set, I guess?  
  
SEAN: Huh.  
  
ASHLEY: The idea is that the music selections are based on you and your personal tastes, and then instead of it just being, you know, a regular, personalized playlist, the AI generated DJ will, you know, give you some context like a traditional DJ would. So like some facts about the artist or some context, or maybe it's just like, hey, it's Tuesday, how you feeling? Or whatever, you know, like it will give you a little extra color to the playlist.

SEAN: Where does this AI DJ exist? Let me open up my Spotify. I didn't even know this robot existed.

ASHLEY: If you go to your phone and then at the top, you should see like a bunch of different tabs like music, podcasts, audiobooks.

SEAN: Ok. So what do I do? I just hit play and it’s gonna start yelling at me?

ASHLEY: Yeah, you just hit play.

AI DJ: Hey, what's going on, Sean?

SEAN: <laughs>

AI DJ: It's really great to be here. I'm Xavier, my friends call me X, and from this moment on, I'm going.

SEAN: X! That's taken!

AI DJ: On Spotify. Yeah. And I but listen, I don't set timers. I don't switch on your lights. I'm on about music and your music. I know what you listen to. I see No Age there. So I'm going to be here every day playing those artists. You got a rotation going back into your history for songs you used to love, and I'm always on the lookout for new stuff, too, just to push your boundaries a little bit. I'm going to come back every few songs to change up the vibe, but if you're ever not feeling the music, there's going to be a DJ button at the bottom of your screen. Tap that and I'll come back early to switch it up. All right, enough talk. I mentioned No Age. Let's get it going with that and some other music you've been listening to.   
  
 *<NATSOUND> AI DJ playing ”Miner” by No Age*

SEAN: Cute. They're going to play Miner by No Age. X over here, X going to give it to you – is just playing me music I already like? I could do that myself. <laughs>

ASHLEY: Yeah. I mean, I'd be curious, yeah, if you're getting a lot of what you've already listened to, or if you think there's some new discovery there.

SEAN: The visualization’s kind of creepy. It's like a circle with a mouth. I don't like it.

ASHLEY: Yeah….

SEAN: But! I wanna know: Do other people like it? Are people using this thing?

ASHLEY: I personally haven’t heard anyone mention AI DJ to me. Spotify says it's very successful. I can't remember if they've, like, shared any specific details about user numbers, but they, you know, they haven't said anything to counteract that narrative of like it's a successful launch for them. The thing I do see people using more and what they really do seem to like is this Daylist.

SEAN: Hm.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: I saw a TikTok where somebody said Spotify has a new personalized playlist called the daylist that changes all throughout the day based on what music you usually listen to then. And I was like, ‘Oh my god, what’s on mine?’ So this is my yearning soul-crushing emotional melodramatic swamp evening.*

SEAN: What's wrong with just good old fashioned like, ‘Hey, this DJ’s pretty good and always introduces me to new music.’ Why did we have to go from the human curated to the algo curated?

ASHLEY: I think there's a few reasons.

SCORING <Brain Science Outro>

ASHLEY: One is kind of like a typical techie reason, which is like a DJ might push you to try new music that you've never heard before. And it's perhaps like, I guess I would say, like make you uncomfortable in the sense of like, I don't know this person. I'm like totally experiencing something new, which to some people might sound awesome, but to other people they might be like, ‘No, I just want to hear something I like. I don't really want to be like pushed. I'm just trying to do a workout here, and I want something that works for that moment that works for me.’ And so if you're a tech company, naturally you're going to be like, we want to serve people, stuff that keeps them using our app. We don't want them to switch off and just do something else with their time, or just turn the music off completely.

SEAN: Hmm.

ASHLEY: So from there, you can see kind of an incentive just to make sure that everyone's having a good time, basically. But then also, one of the reasons I reported on that Spotify has kind of started to make this shift over to the algorithm is because, you know, these music curators – like the physical humans – it's really difficult to scale them. You know, you would need a huge workforce to cover all the genres, all the different possibilities of situations you might be in that you want to listen to music. And so really what they're trying to do is like, use humans to better classify music that they can then put out into the personalized playlists.

*<CLIP> EK: The truth is: as good as we are at recommendations, if you really put your mind to it, you could create a better playlist yourself. If you really spent the time and researching and doing all that stuff. I think five years to ten years from now, that will not be true. I think we will do a better job, even if you spent a whole working day trying to figure out what you wanted to listen to, we will be able to create a playlist that is so much better than any of that.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Hm. Do you think in this new, sort of algorithmic-driven model, that story you told about Cardi B could still happen?

ASHLEY: I think so. Yeah, I do think artists continue to find success on playlists. It's kind of almost like a ladder system. Like maybe you start out on these personalized playlists or like super niche playlists, but then you eventually rise up until you're like, on the Rap Caviar or whatever, where you are now on the flagship editorial playlists. And one thing that I know rights holders artists do like about the personalized playlists – or at least they call them “algo-torial” playlists – is essentially whereas on a flagship playlist, maybe you have 50 artists or something on a personalized playlist. What ends up happening is these human curators might put 100 artists on the playlist or more, and you and I will have different playlists, but essentially, you know, there's still this bucket of people that can be chosen from, and it really just allows more artists to be heard. Rather than limiting the opportunity to just these select lucky artists that are on the flagship playlist.

SEAN: Ashley, do you think there's room for both of these phenomena to exist sort of in perpetuity? The the like trusted critic review from Craig of the new Jay-Z/D'Angelo collaboration as a way of discovering that there's a new Jay-Z/D'Angelo collaboration versus the AI DJ which I personally find a little creepy, but I'm sure some people love and yearn for that is giving you all the things you like. And maybe based on those things, something that's like it that you might also like.

ASHLEY: Yeah, I mean, I think there's a broader crisis around digital media, obviously. So like, you know, if you're publishing an article to a website like, is that a sustainable future in business? You know, I think right now it's in question. But as far as, like, human beings sharing music, they like and like making recommendations, you know, that culture does exist on TikTok. I think there's just more of an open question of, like, editorial independence and whether people are paid to say that they like something or if they actually like something. And then the playlists, the personalized playlists, yeah. I think, you know, there are people that would probably argue that somehow these personalized playlists kind of flatten culture and you lose the nuances of the human existence. So I do think there are, like, a lot of questions about what happens when you lose these independent editorial voices, and I hope there's still room for them. But as of right now, it seems like it's becoming a smaller and smaller opportunity.

SCORING <“Green Banana” - Lee “Scratch” Perry>

SEAN: Ashley Carman! She writes about all things audio for *Bloomberg News*.

The program today was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and Hady Mawajdeh. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd.   
  
This is *Today, Explained*.   
  
IN PODCAST [NOT RADIO]: Earlier in the show you heard from music-lover Craig Jenkins, who writes beautifully about the good stuff and some of the bad at *Vulture*. We asked him what he’s listening to:

CRAIG: Wall of Eyes by the Smile on Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood and Tom Skinner. The Not Radiohead guys, have made a great record that is really gritty and weird and sort of, like, murky. Just a fun listen. Lee Scratch Perry final album, final Recordings out in February. I really enjoyed them. Hopefully other people will.

SCORING UP, OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]