

# CHRIS SMITH

## MIX TAPE

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN OBSESSED with music. When I was a kid, I eagerly awaited each new *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* magazine, even though I didn't necessarily understand the record-geek Aramaic in which they were written. (What's an 11-year-old to make of a sentence that name-checks both Camus and Ozzy Osbourne?) It hardly mattered, though. It was a wide new world.

Later, I became a loyal reader of *Maximumrocknroll*, the Bay Area punk bible. A pulpy, grayscale rag that seemed to smudge your fingers if you even looked at it, MRR ran profiles of bands big and small; dispatches from scenes across the world, from Tacoma to Tokyo; and, this being the 1980s, screeds against Ronald Reagan. I always turned to the reviews first. There were pages upon pages of them, capsule reviews of roughly a million bands I'd never heard of. These listings filled me with awe: People had listened to all of this stuff—and they could place every release within the punk cosmology, each tape (they were mostly tapes) a speck of dust in an expanding universe of sound.

My education was laborious. Every month, I'd stuff a few dollars into an envelope and send off for whatever sounded most interesting: a thrash band from Sweden, maybe, offering a demo with 57 tracks in 42 minutes, or some teenagers in Peoria who wrote songs about cow-tipping. There's no way

I could've found this stuff by myself; MRR was my only point of entry, one release leading to the next. The reviews, however sketchy, served as my guides—bright, clear lines through a horizonless landscape. The punk underground, just like the mainstream, had its gatekeepers.

I grew up to be a journalist, and as a member of the print media and sometime music critic, I hear a lot these days about gatekeepers. Most of what I hear is ominous: that people who do what I do are drowning in the flood of blogs and news aggregators, of amateur opinion and homespun analysis. Professionally speaking, this is bad news.

But for a music fan, it's life-changing. Websites like Pitchfork have pretty much supplanted the likes of *Rolling Stone*, but they're probably less influential than their forebears. Not everyone paid attention to music critics back in the day, of course, but now even fewer people do. That's because we don't need them anymore. We have MP3 blogs.

Like their dead-tree predecessors, MP3 blogs offer that old sense of hidden worlds opened wide. (By the way, this isn't about the species of blog that exists to vomit up the latest Jay-Z a few days before it officially drops. I'm talking about sites that primarily feature out-of-print or under-the-radar music.) There are blogs dedicated to every subgenre in the world—conscious hip-hop, mystic

jazz, crust punk, black metal—and the best ones overflow with erudite treatises. A guy in Japan, for example, runs an exhaustive blog called Dr. Schluss' Garage of Psychedelic Obscurities that showcases little-known psychedelic albums from the 1960s and '70s; each post has a scholarly yet approachable introduction that helps new listeners find their feet. If you have an afternoon to burn, you can get up to speed on a whole musical tradition.

My own introduction to MP3 blogs came via Fela Kuti. While Googling an old album by the Nigerian afrobeat pioneer, I stumbled on a blog called Likembe. In addition to some obscure Fela grooves, it featured posts on West African highlife music (think Sunny Ade), a supremely funky group from pre-civil war Somalia, and dollops of sugary Congolese soukous music. The site's blogroll led me from one point on the map to another, each with its own specialties and predilections.

Soon, on a blog called Sea Never Dry, I discovered a whole new subgenre: Zam-rock, which briefly flourished throughout 1970s Africa, as musicians inspired by Cream and Jimi Hendrix picked up guitars and played like western garage rockers. Most of these bands came from Zambia, a country not known in the west for much of anything. I clicked on one of the sound files. It was incendiary. The guitarist laid down acidic, warbling leads that

turned fuzzy when the bridge rolled around, while the singer barked in a voice alternately haughty and playful, like Mick Jagger via the crown colonies. It was a lo-fi affair: The drums sounded like cardboard boxes, and occasionally the track hiccupped. But the melodies shone through.

Entranced, I set about educating myself. It turned out there were a dozen similar bands, each a reflection of western hard rock as filtered through a distinctly African, postcolonial lens. There were party songs, but there were also songs about topics American musicians wouldn't have touched. A Nigerian band called Tirogo played a song called "Feed the Nation," rhyming "inflation" with "malnutrition."

The Internet may indeed be killing the music industry, but I wouldn't go back even if I could. As a media professional, I'll try to muddle through. As a listener, I'm happy I don't have to sit by the mailbox, waiting for a tape from Sweden to arrive. There's still plenty of wonder out there. It's just unmediated now.