

1973 and all that –

1973 as a rock and roll Annus Mirabilis? Six thousand miles away from the old Rolling Stone office in San Francisco, it felt more like a fancy-dress party somewhere in Teenage Wasteland the morning after the revolution didn't happen. For 15-year-old Cameron Crowe, torturing his mom with Led Zeppelin and the Allman Brothers Band it may have seemed as if a depoliticised version of the rock and roll hippie dream was still in full effect, but John Lennon had already announced that “the dream is over”, and within the shabby confines of New Musical Express's funky, down-at-heels offices in Long Acre, it was — in the words of Bryan Ferry — “time to try for something new.”

I'd arrived at the NME the previous summer just before turning 21, having been headhunted from OZ and IT — the Brit underground press — and bringing their agenda with me. This meant being FOR sex, drugs and freaking out the squares by any means necessary, and AGAINST racism, corporate rock and Emerson, Lake & Palmer. By this time, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison were dead, The Beatles had broken up, The Rolling Stones were wearing their cynicism on their (album) sleeves, Bob Dylan was off somewhere being gnomic and incomprehensible, Sly Stone was sinking into hard-drug decline, and radical idealism was sprawled bleeding outside Kent State university or locked up with the Black Panthers. In America, nevertheless, it was still possible to pretend that the Sixties were still alive: in Britain it wasn't.

My generation of British rock writers had drawn an enormous amount of inspiration from the likes of Rolling Stone, which had in its first few years blasted a path for an entirely new kind of rock writing, but then settled into woozy complacency. The most inspiring of the pioneers were Greil Marcus, who brought critical rigour, piercing insight and vaulting intellectual ambition to the milieu; and Lester Bangs, whose infectious passion for the rush you get from truly intense music and furious irreverence towards the established proprieties and standardised verities of both music and language struck a resounding chord (a first-position A major on a Fender

Stratocaster played through a Marshall amplifier turned all the way up, naturally) with every would-be iconoclast. It was Lester's next port of call, at Detroit's Creem magazine, which provided us with our most enduring American model. Creem was edgy where Rolling Stone was mellow; satirical where Rolling Stone was sycophantic; fun where Rolling Stone was — let's face it — dull with a capital DUH. Creem's photo captions (many of them written by Lester, as we later discovered) were either surreal jokes or sardonic digs at their subject. Where the British pop weeklies of the era treated their readers like besotted teenyboppers and their rockier equivalents addressed their punters as if they were aspiring roadies, Creem talked to you as if you were smart, adventurous and passionately committed to the music as a source of both fun and redemption. As we were, or thought we were.

So we had some of that. NME was at the crossroads when I arrived, having recently commenced the process of transforming itself from the most face-achingly trivial popstastic gazette in the country to something a little more substantial and challenging. Deputy editor Nick Logan, who replaced transition editor Alan Smith in 1973, and his co-conspirator Tony Tyler were ready to take things as close to the limit as possible, and NME's corporate bosses at IPC were prepared to look the other way while they did it. And so, in short order, another underground press writer, Nick Kent, signed up, along with photographers Joe Stevens and Pennie Smith, followed about ninety seconds later by Ian MacDonald and Neil Spencer. Effectively, the underground press staged a bloodless coup with the enthusiastic participation of several of the existing inmates, and IPC was, effectively, conned into publishing a semi-underground rock weekly unlike anything that had ever been seen in Britain.

Our ethos was straightforward: power to the people. The people in question being our readers, who had first call on our loyalty. We despised the record industry; gave not even two hoots for the sensitivities of our publisher or the profits of their shareholders, and relentlessly satirised even favourite musicians like Bryan Ferry — whose ludicrous clothes and fragile ego inspired us to seek endlessly for new ways to misspell his name. (The most memorable included Brain Fury, Biriyani Ferret, Byron Ferrari, Brown Furry and Brawn Fairy.) American PRs had no idea what to make of us. Taking the piss out of the stars verged on lese majeste, if not outright sacrilege.

Of course, the intrinsic differences between the British and American rock scenes were massive. America was a very big, very wealthy country where supergroups lurched around a circuit of huge arenas playing to vast crowds stuffed full of drugs. Britain was a small country with very few enormodomes and considerably lower disposable incomes. Which meant that the biggest of the British bands — Led Zeppelin, The Who, The Rolling Stones — followed the dollar and effectively became American groups: as remote from UK audiences as The Allman Brothers (who never played Britain until after guitarist Duane Allman, their star attraction, had croaked) or The Grateful Dead. Nowadays, MTV can carry a new trend all over the US almost in real time, but in the early seventies the sheer size and scale of the place meant that change occurred with agonising slowness; whereas in tiny little Britain the speed of pop-cultural events was exhilaratingly accelerated.

The Allmans may have been the bees' knees for Rolling Stone's readers, but as far as the NME was concerned, cosmic cowboys with cocaine crusted in their walrus moustaches were last decade's thing. For us, 1973 was about the science-fiction glam-rock of David Bowie and Roxy Music, and the hypnotic new groove filtering over from Jamaica. Our taste in Americans ran more to proto-punks like Iggy Pop and the late, lamented MC5 than to hayseed millionaire hippies like Crosby, Stills & Nash, and our midnight turntables were more likely to be spinning Bob Marley's "Burnin'" or Iggy's "Raw Power" than any Mellow Mafia mumblings from LA. We spent the first half of the seventies willing punk into existence, though, for some of us, when it finally arrived it wasn't quite what we ordered.

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So: Golden Age of what, exactly? Well, if 1973 represented anything of that nature, it was the golden age of promotional expenditure and all the concomitant opportunities to bite the hand that fed us. In those days, record companies seemed to have unlimited amounts of money to blow on dumb stunts to promote dumber records, and we considered it our revolutionary duty to make sure that they spent as much of it as possible on entertaining us. Coaches would be chartered to

schlep several dozen lurching, reeling hacks to see risibly useless bands at Bristol Colston Hall. Beer, wine and non-vintage champagne would flow as press officers, prettily accoutred in the latest company T-shirts, sauntered down the aisles dropping large chunks of hash and fresh packs of Rizla papers into passengers' waiting hands. No conceivable album was so inconsequential a cultural event that it didn't arrive bundled with T-shirts and badges, or wasn't marked by a launch party. Sometimes the bands would actually perform, which was irritating but often unavoidable.

Indicate that you might, under certain circumstances, be prepared to write a 400-word concert review of some dodgy combo and the next thing you knew another press officer would be flying you to Amsterdam, buying you a stupefyingly expensive dinner, taking you on a tour of the red light district and uncomplainingly parting with corporate wedge to buy you a wrap of overpriced cocaine. Then you'd get home, slide behind the typewriter for fifteen minutes and slag the band off. Oh how we laughed!

It was thanks to the time-honoured institution of the press junket that I met, albeit on different occasions, both Cameron Crowe and Lester Bangs. The teenage Crowe was the very soul of amiability: relaxed and confident beyond his years, as well he might be, considering that he was a top writer for a major publication and made considerably more money than any of us did. Bangs, despite his fearsome reputation, was a big genial bear of a man and, on his visits to the NME office, was sufficiently sober to converse perceptively, charmingly and — bogglingly enough — quietly.

As rock writers go, Bangs and Crowe could not have been more different. Crowe, despite his considerable talents, was essentially a fanboy: a 'friend of the stars' who rarely upset the applecart by expressing a controversial opinion. He had the kind of presence which relaxed his subjects, made them feel protective towards him, encouraged them to open up. This is a considerable asset for an interviewer, make no mistake, and it paid off, big time. Lester, on the other hand, was essentially a critic, ranter and raconteur: a grimy prophet howling in the wilderness. His celebrated interviews with Lou Reed were knockabout classics of the genre —

someone, incidentally, should adapt the transcripts of those interviews into a screenplay entitled Lester & Lou before anybody here gets significantly older — but his scabrous attacks on the second-rate (especially the expensively-hyped second-rate) and passionate hymns to the transcendent power of loud, filthy noise forever barred him from the first-class lounge where publishers, performers, record companies and journalists smoothly network and conspire against the public interest. The world needs a lot more Lesters — it's a dirty job but somebody's got to do it — though comparatively few are prepared to pay the price. Lester paid it, in full, dying in 1982 at the age of 33. He died a stupid death after living a stupid life, but leaving behind him a body of work which virtually defines its genre.

Cameron Crowe, on the other hand, will be remembered primarily for his movies. Though possibly not this one.

Charles Shaar Murray's Boogie Man: The Adventures Of John Lee Hooker in the American Twentieth Century is currently available from Penguin Books