

MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

AllMusic. <http://www.allmusic.com/>.

Visiting AllMusic for the first time, one is struck by the apparent audacity of the online record guide's ambitious title. More striking still is the subsequent realization that the claim is well substantiated. Within several clicks of the homepage, users might encounter detailed biographies of artists as diverse as Wendy Carlos, Joni Mitchell, Conlon Nancarrow, and Little Richard. Several moments later the same users might find themselves comparing a pair of well-informed genre overviews detailing the differences between "neo-traditionalist country" and "new traditionalist country." The site's primary mission has always been to aid the casual listener in the process of musical exploration, but its broad scope—providing accurate biographical information and editorial reviews on artists from virtually every milieu of commercial music—makes the site an invaluable springboard for researchers and a convenient demonstrational tool for educators.

AllMusic began as the precocious side project of Chicago blues/folk singer and programmer Michael Erlewine. Combining his interests in information technology and music, and fueled by a general frustration with the lack of consumer resources for record buyers, Erlewine launched AllMusic in 1991. Over the following decades, the site transitioned from a pre-World Wide Web gopher site to a more universally accessible web database and grew to impressive proportions. The organization's first reference books were printed in 1992 as the website branched into similar guides for movies and video games. All Media Guide Holdings was purchased by the Rovi Corporation in 2007 and in the years since has expanded its coverage to over three million album releases with over thirty-three million individual tracks. New albums are processed at a rate of about one thousand per week.

The bulk of the site consists of three main types of pages. The most specific are those devoted to a particular album or track. Over five hundred thousand items in AllMusic's database feature original reviews, and these pages comprise the core of the site's critical content. Most reviews are produced in-house, though freelance submissions are occasionally accepted. The editorial tone varies from one record to the next, but not so much as one might expect given the broad scope of the project. Despite the many different musics represented, the editors rate recordings only with respect to other works in the same genre or by the same artist—Britney Spears, the FAQ explains, is safe from comparison to Miles Davis. As a result, criticism at AllMusic tends to be more moderate than that of such other contemporary online publications as Pitchfork or Drowned In Sound.

The content of each entry strikes a balance between semi-rigorous catalog information and subjective categorization. Each review contains numerous data points listing the composer/performer credits, releases, ratings, awards, release dates, duration, track titles, and other production details. This information—checked whenever possible against a physical object—is accurate and can serve as a good point of departure for initial research, but is not always comprehensive or up to date. Researchers seeking exhaustive technical details should be advised to

supplement their searches with other sources. To cite one example, the entry on Frank Zappa's 1966 debut, *Freak Out!*, currently lists eight releases dating back only to the 1995 Rykodisc CD edition—the user-edited Discogs.com lists twenty-eight, including the original Verve double LP. Profiles on lesser-known artists are updated infrequently. At the time of writing (spring 2013), the site lists bluegrass bassist Mitch Jayne's birthdate, but not his 2010 death. Visitors are encouraged to submit biographical and discographical corrections—a link to a web form appears on each page—but as the editors acknowledge, user-sourced updates are often slow to appear.

Album reviews are also typically accompanied by lists of adjectives describing “moods” and “themes.” Although likely of little use to those pursuing hard data, these lists, constructed by the reviewer and checked by the editorial staff, provide curious listeners with intriguing routes for exploration. The entry on Leonard Bernstein's 1956 recording of *Candide*, for instance, is described as “rousing,” “wistful,” and “playful.” Clicking on the last of these adjectives, the user will find further links to albums as diverse as the Beastie Boys' *Paul's Boutique*, Dolly Parton's *Better Day*, and Justin Bieber's *Believe*.

The site also contains entries for every artist or group in the database. Often, the focus of each artist overview is an extensive biography and list of works. Like the pages devoted to specific recordings, these entries boast an impressive amount of data including genres, styles, years active (and birth/death dates), followers, and influences. In its first two decades, the site drew a hard line between classical and popular music. In this earlier configuration, crossover artists like Yo-Yo Ma, Terry Riley, and Billy Joel were given separate profiles to correspond with their work in different musical spheres. These distinctions were removed several years ago when the site underwent major structural revisions. As a result, music from both sides of the division is now presented in an idiosyncratic but logical manner. Popular recordings are classified as “albums” and “releases,” with the former being conceived as canonical entries in an artist's oeuvre, not unlike the lists of works one encounters at the end of a composer entry in the *New Grove*. Entries on classical composers, on the other hand, tend to focus on significant recordings, sidelining the traditional list of compositions to a subsidiary tab.

The pages covering the broadest scope are those devoted to a particular genre. These entries are arranged hierarchically into three tiers: genre (“Blues,” “Country,” etc.), sub-genre (under Country: “Honky-Tonk,” “Traditional Country,” etc.) and style (under Traditional Country: “Bluegrass,” “Yodeling,” etc.). In addition to a concise summary of the history of a particular genre and its musical characteristics, each overview provides several paths for further exploration. Users are given editor-compiled lists of “significant music” as well as lists of recordings in that genre most visited by site users. Although these pages are subject to all the usual pitfalls of categorizing music according to its characteristics, they are impressively effective for quick familiarization with the most salient features of a particular genre and the various splinterings within that genre.

Aside from the vast amount of data collected, AllMusic's most impressive feature is the extensive cross-linking between pages. Nearly everything is clickable, allowing users to navigate quickly and intuitively from one page to another. The accessibility

of this information is the site's most valuable asset. With so many routes for further information, the researcher is presented with myriad avenues for deepening her knowledge of a particular subject. This is particularly true for scholars of popular music who, when confronted with some new or esoteric genre, may turn to AllMusic for a concise, reliable overview.

Educators will find many uses for the site as well. In most cases, users can click to hear a short sample of each track or follow a link to listen to it at Spotify, Rdio, or MOG, or purchase the track at iTunes. Even the short sample clips for a given recording, artist, or genre would provide an effective means of familiarizing students with new styles. Teachers with students working on popular music projects in particular would do well to suggest AllMusic as a first stop for initial research. The site might also be employed for any number of in-class activities or homework assignments and would provide a particularly valuable supplement to a unit on genre or criticism.

Of course, as a resource for expanding one's personal listening, the site is unrivaled. The editors maintain a regularly updated curatorial blog and in recent months have added new features across the site incorporating user-generated data. Visitors are now encouraged to sign in and submit their own album ratings. Average user ratings appear alongside the editorial ratings and allow the site to generate personalized recommendations. Combined, these features encourage the kind of clicking behavior prevalent at such sites as YouTube, Wikipedia, or the Internet Movie Database, where a user might quickly become blissfully—and productively—distracted for hours at a time.

Andre Mount