

Editorial

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Don't get me started... It began as an experiment. How to find the words to say what we wanted say about music? Asking ourselves over and over: what are we trying to say? And why? There are a few rules: four to be exact. Total commitment. Always writing. No more than 2000 words (and less, if possible!). No criticism of each other. It's a space for disjointed dreamers, verbal acrobats, and irresponsible grammarians. Or perhaps it's an asylum for linguistic mishaps and malcontents who want to practice etymological misrule among forbidden verbs, wily nouns and prickly pronouns. And anyway, in the end, it's really about finding your voice; a process of discovering who you are and where you're from in what you write. But hang on, first things first! "How's it going to work?" they asked, sitting around a table, one lunchtime in early October. "Well," I said, "something like this." And then it wasn't at all like that. The start was, by any measure, a conventional one, boring even in retrospect. "Read an essay and respond in not more than..." was the instruction. "Still too much like school," I thought, when the initial pieces came in, struggling to pull away from the usual habits of exegesis. "As X noted in her study of Y." So I started reading everything I could get my hands on about writing: how to write more, better, faster, plainer, clearer, with greater fluidity, poetically, technically, philosophically; how to find passion in syntax, structure and form; and how to use symbols, metaphors and metonyms to create new ways and worlds of words. Particular tasks turned into existential journeys; someone's view of the park became a fable of belief. Henry James, Kathleen Stewart, E. B. White, Kazuo Ishiguro, Mary Oliver, William Zinsser, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many others became our guides. And so we wrote about making music together, we looked for the rhythms in dialogue, described a single moment in time, imitated our favorite author, imagined the perfect music lesson, found words that put us back into place, confessed to each other the metaphors we live by, cut out the clutter we all knew was there, responded to songs with soliloquy, and captured with a glance what the gaze so often obscures. "We live amid surfaces," Emerson once said, "and the true art of life is to skate well upon them." The essays that fill the pages below are testimony to some fine skating. We invite you to join with these lyrical skaters as they figure what their words and images and sounds can do and just how far they can take us with them.

Riffs emerged from a writing group at Birmingham City University, established in 2015 by Nick Gebhardt and supported by the Birmingham School of Media. As popular music scholars, many of the original 'Write Clubbers' straddled disciplines: music; sociology; media studies; anthropology; dance. Some felt adrift, on thin ice.

'Write Club' offered an opportunity of 2,000 words and the space of a table and eight chairs to explore what it meant to research popular music, to write about it, to construct an argument, a description, a song, a line. Once nerves were finally quashed and it became comfortable to watch another read your work, the writing became better and better until it seemed a crime to keep them under wraps, hidden away from curious eyes on a private blog.

In this, our first issue of Riffs, we offer up some of our thoughts and writing in the hope that we will be able to read yours, and that each of us will in some small way change the ways in which we think and write about popular music. Consider this your official invitation to Write Club.

- Sarah Raine, Editor.