

# FUTURE OF PRINT IS NICHE

Is the demise of the NME another sign that print is dying? Perhaps not argues **EMMA JONES**



**"F**arewell to the *NME*. When I was a teenager, I read you from cover to cover. I met Bernie Taupin through an ad on the

backpages.

It changed my life forever."

Elton John posted this epitaph on Instagram last week.

In other words, without the *NME* there would not have been a Rocket Man. The Yellow Brick would never have been bid farewell. And nobody would have been told it was 'their song'.

No surprise, then, that the demise of the *NME* after 66 years, announced last week, brought out the inner Morrissey in many of us. Not that many of us were picking it up anymore.

Once, *NME* provided essential escapism for desperate kids mired in the cultural voids of suburbia.

But that was in its heyday.

Long before stars could communicate directly with their fans via social media.

Unlike Sir Elton, still standing, and silver surfing the super highways at 70 – as he nears retirement yet again – the *New Musical Express* failed to keep-up with the dubstep beat of pop's pacemaker.

Even though it outlived the *Melody Maker*, whose beat-box packed up 18 years ago.

By the end, the *NME* was the John

Lydon of the County Life Butter advert.

And an accountant somewhere had to run it through with a knife, sending it to the great pulping machine in the sky.

*Smash Hits* fell out of the retail charts a decade earlier.

By the time I took over the editorship in the early noughties, sales were mostly driven by tat freebies on the cover.

Mix CDs and "funky denim" backpacks that unleashed pre-teen pester power in supermarkets on to hassled mums.

The rules of what went inside was similarly irrational.

Often governed less by its talented roster of fanatical music journalists, or even its eager editor, and more by the

expletive-driven demands of diva impresario Louis Walsh, who determined which boy-band was on the front, or which one got an award.

(Although, to my credit, I did get Gorillaz and Destiny's Child on the cover.)

But most frequently, it was the shrill dictats of the MD's eleven-year-old daughter.

The apple of this executive's eye – the Veruca Salt of the magazine publishing world – who could spike a story by remote.

"She didn't like it," would be the lukewarm cup of tea to our Limp Bizkit double-page spread.

That child is probably a publishing

exec in her own right by now – journalism is riven with nepotism - and no doubt she will have her own version of what went wrong at *Smash Hits* and the *NME*.

But she's not my boss anymore, so instead, I have decided to look at what went right.

To focus on the good stuff that got eroded along the way.

Working class voices are the blindingly obvious one.

Both *NME* and *Smash Hits* proved some of the best writing doesn't need either Oxbridge, or an expensive, postgraduate degree in journalism.

The magazine's relationship with its readers relied on the opposite – the writers spoke the same language that the audience understood, and felt part of.

In a climate where trust in the media is at an all-time low, surely tackling the class deficit in publishing, would be an easy win for anyone wanting to claw back its audience.

As Danny Baker observed: "The *NME* never once asked me where I studied. Or what certificates I had. Or where I saw myself in five years. They just sent you to see some band and asked for 400 words on them. If they liked it they'd give you an album to review. Next thing you know you're in New York."

The same is true across the board.

Social mobility charity The Sutton Trust found in 2016 that 51% of Britain's top 100 journalists went to private school – more than seven times the UK average.

Allowing Britain's over-indulged corporate middle-class to monopolise the pages and the airwaves is a threat to a truly plural media.

In many ways, social media has bucked this trend, in so much as anyone can write a blog – the only difference being reporters don't get paid.

Does that make it self-exploitation, rather than meritocracy?

Social media is not social mobility in the way that Danny Baker would recognise.

Digital media is also a different model, one where quality is all too often sacrificed at the altar of populism.

As Amol Rajan, the BBC's media editor noted, digital publishing is driven less by quality-assured writing, and more by the dopamine hit that web copy can produce.

Talking about his time editing *The Independent*, Rajan observed the difference in what drove a successful

digital and print version of a story. Click bait being key.

But parallels with the digital marketplace can be drawn, too.

Consumers craving a more tailor-made, niche product – much like *NME* and *Smash Hits* once were – use the internet to personalise, or self-edit, to their own musical tastes.

Many argue this is further evidence that print publishing cannot survive in today's marketplace.

I say the opposite is true.

There is still demand for quality journalism.

A counter-culture of thoughtful, literate people.

*The Times Literary Supplement* is the fastest growing weekly publication.

*GQ* is another example, of a magazine holding its own.

Editor Dylan Jones said: "It's the quality that's important. For the last four or five years, everyone has been blinded by algorithms and as is now proving to be the case it doesn't work that way."

If you look at the publishing models that are doing well, it's clear that you've got to have a strong identity, and stick to what you're good at.

The trick is to refine it with the times, without losing that USP.

*GQ*'s recent Skepta and Naomi Campbell shoot, celebrating British black power, is good evidence that publishing can thrive if its discerning.

Same applies to *Horse and Hound* magazine, with its new feature series on tackroom stereotypes.

I used to share an office with *Kerrang!* and *Mixmag*, and both still have healthy pulse today, even if spin-offs such as tours and television are just as important as the printed word.

Take an even better example: *The New European*.

Whose mad idea was it to produce a newspaper, at a time when print is dying, knowing that 52% of the market won't buy it, and the rest you'll have to compete for (and not just with Liberal Democrat News).

Our editor's idea apparently. And guess what. We're still standing.