

An album overshadowed by its predecessor:

Investigating six album reviews on Queen's *A Day At The Races*

Bachelor's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Musiikki on taiteenlaji, joka tarjoaa jotakin lähes jokaiselle. Musiikki on usein läsnä jokapäiväisessä elämässämme ja musiikin kuuntelu onkin suosittu vapaa-ajan harrastus. Moni löytää oman suosikkityylilajinsa nuoruudessaan, mutta musiikkimaku voi myös kehittyä myöhemmin aikuisuudessa. Oman lempimusiikin kuuntelun tiedetään muun muassa aktivoivan aivojen mielihyvakeskusta ja parantavan mielialaa.</p> <p>Kaikki eivät kuitenkaan pidä samanlaisesta musiikista ja musiikki onkin taiteenlaji, joka jakaa vahvasti mielipiteitä. Jokaisella on oikeus omaan mielipiteeseensä ja usein onkin täysin tarpeetonta kiistellä eri musiikkityylilajien paremmuudesta tai yrittää vaikuttaa muiden musiikkimakuun. Ihmisillä, jotka arvioivat musiikkia työkseen, on kuitenkin enemmän tietämystä aiheesta, ja heitä pidetään eräänlaisina mielipidejohtajina siinä mitä tulee ”hyvään” musiikkimakuun. Musiikkia on arvioitu vuosisatojen ajan ja populaarimusiikin kritisointi on tähän nähden suhteellisen uusi ilmiö.</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastelen kuutta ammattikriitikon kirjoittamaa levyarviota Queenin <i>A Day At The Races</i>-levystä ja tutkin, minkälaisia usein toistuvia teemoja arvioista löytyy. Aineisto analysoitiin hyödyntäen aineistolähtöistä sisällönanalyysiä. Löysin arvioista kaiken kaikkiaan neljä eri teemaa, jotka ovat 1) vertaukset bändin aikaisempaan albumiin, (2) vertaukset muihin bändeihin tai artisteihin, (3) kappaleiden saama huomio ja (4) samankaltaisuudet ja eroavaisuudet siinä, kuinka tiettyjä kappaleita kuvataan.</p> <p>Queen on yksi populaarimusiikin menestyneimpiä yhtyeitä ja joidenkin arvioiden mukaan heidän levyjään on myyty maailmanlaajuisesti jopa kolmesataa miljoonaa kappaletta. Suuresta suosiostaan huolimatta Queenia on tutkittu akateemisesti suhteellisen vähän. <i>A Day At The Races</i> on yhtyeen viides levy, joka julkaistiin vuoden 1976 lopussa. Levyä pidetään eräänlaisena jatko-osana edeltäjälleen, vuoden 1975 <i>A Night At The Opera</i>:lle, joka sai osakseen ylistystä kriitikoilta. <i>A Day At The Races</i> jääkin usein edeltäjänsä varjoon, ja olen kiinnostunut ottamaan selvää siitä, mitä kriitikot kirjoittavat kyseisestä levystä.</p> <p>Löytämäni neljä teemaa osoittivat, että arvioista löytyi runsaasti samankaltaisuuksia, vaikka ne ovat eri kriitikoiden kirjoittamia. Vertaukset yhtyeen vuotta vanhempaan levyyn olivat yleisiä, bändin musiikkia verrattiin lukuisiin muihin bändeihin ja artisteihin, muutama kappale jäi vähemmälle huomiolle ja tiettyjä kappaleita kuvailtiin hyvin samankaltaisesti ja toisaalta taas toisiin kappaleisiin suhtauduttiin hyvin eri tavoin. Jatkossa voisi olla mielenkiintoista tutkia jonkin (legendaarisen aseman saaneen) yhtyeen tai artistin varhaisista ja uudemmista levyistä kirjoitettuja arvioita ja tarkastella, kuinka ne eroavat toisistaan.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

Music is an art form that has something to offer for almost everyone. In today's world listening to music is an ever-present phenomenon and a notable leisure time activity for most people (Schäfer and Sedlmeier, 2009: 487). Many people find their own favourite music genre in youth that often stays that way for life (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013: 704). However, it has also been shown that musical tastes still develop in adulthood (ibid). Listening to one's favourite music has been proven to cause positive chills and activate the reward centres of the brain (McFerran and Rickard, 2012: 222). Music is also a commonly used emotional self-regulation tool for people of all ages, meaning that music can be used for several purposes such as mood improvement, distraction, and relaxation (Saarikallio, 2010: 308).

However, not everyone enjoys the same kind of music, and different tastes in music are bound to divide opinions and cause arguments. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but what sets professional music critics and regular listeners apart, is the special knowledge of the field that critics possess (Desler, 2013). Of course, also music critics have their own personal preferences in music and therefore a certain piece of music can get vastly different reviews from different critics.

Music has been a target of evaluation at least since the 18th century (*The Oxford Companion to Music* (2011: 187). In comparison to classical music, popular music is a relatively new phenomenon and it has been seriously evaluated only since the 1960s (Jones, 2002: 45). Despite the fact that reviews rarely have an effect on the album sales, the opinions of critics are valued (Frith, 1988: 183-185).

In this thesis I will investigate six professional reviews written on Queen's *A Day At The Races* album and see what kind of recurring themes can be found in them. Queen are one of the most successful groups in popular music, but despite that, not much research has been conducted on them (Akkanen, 2005: 11). *A Day At The Races* is an album that is often overshadowed by its predecessor, *A Night At The Opera*, which got mainly positive reviews from the critics. *A Day At The Races*, on the other hand, is seen as a sequel, which is not always the best starting point for an album. I am interested to find out how critics respond to an album that has the position *A Day At The Races* does.

The analysis was done using data based content analysis. Using Tuomi & Sarajärvi's (2009) method of reducing, clustering and abstracting the data, I managed to find four recurring themes in the

reviews, which are: (1) comparisons to the band's previous album, (2) comparisons to other bands and artists, (3) the amount of attention certain songs receive and (4) similarities and differences in how certain songs are described. Despite the fact that these reviews are written by six different critics, many similarities could be found in them.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 CONCEPTS OF POP AND ROCK MUSIC

As concepts, *pop* and *rock* are closely related, but there are also some contradictions between them. Rock music was separated from commercial pop music in the 1960s as it was seen more artistic, experimental and non-commercial. However, just like pop music, rock music was also mass-produced and aimed at teenagers (Akkanen, 2005: 16). Rock music can also be placed under the term *popular music*.

2.2 POPULAR MUSIC CRITICISM

The Oxford Companion to Music (2011: 187) defines music criticism as "the intellectual activity of formulating judgments on the value and degree of excellence of individual works of music, or whole groups or genres". Music criticism is used for evaluating the achievements of composers, new compositions and public performances to name a few examples, and the person doing this, a music critic, is regarded as a certain kind of journalist (ibid.). Modern music criticism originates from classical music, which was evaluated already in the 18th century or even earlier (ibid.). In comparison to that, popular music and popular music criticism are relatively new phenomena. Pop and rock music criticism became a serious topic only after 1964 when Beatles made their breakthrough (Jones, 2002: 45). Before that it was widely believed that rock 'n' roll would cause people to lose their previously "good taste" (ibid.).

It has been suggested that music may be the most difficult art form to criticize, live music in particular, as every performance is different (Sadie, 1980: 44). Furthermore, even though some research has been conducted on people's musical taste and what it tells about their intelligence, it has to be noted that many people are very open-minded to various musical genres. One's taste in music can also be a very sensitive topic and it is rather questionable to draw a line between what is considered to be "good" and "bad" music. However, this is exactly what music critics do and in the following section I will discuss their position and what sets them apart from regular listeners.

2.2.1 POPULAR MUSIC CRITICS

A critic is someone with remarkable knowledge in his or her field who evaluates artistic works (Desler, 2013). Music critics are regarded as opinion leaders when it comes to musical taste and they often disagree with mainstream preferences to some extent (ibid.). Simon Frith has also made similar arguments, stating that rock writers are opinion leaders whose views are taken into account. However, their position only functions if they have similar ideas with their readers of what rock means (1988: 185). Frith also describes rock writers as professional rock fans who help fans to create fantasies about their idols (Frith, 1988: 174). According to him, rock magazines also have an effect on those who do not read them as the people who do read them became opinion leaders and ideological gatekeepers in their eyes (ibid.). As rock and pop music are essentially products of youth culture, some critics believe that that sort of music should stem from that, meaning that music is "wrong" (despite its complexity and artistic qualities) if it does not embody youth culture (Frith, 1988: 186).

2.3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ALBUM REVIEWS

The nature of album reviews has changed over the years. In the 1950s pop-magazine reviews resembled news with predictions of possible success and critics did not attempt to influence the musical taste or the identity of the readers as became the case some decades later. (Frith, 1988: 183). Reviews have been discovered to cause the most notable reactions in the letters to the editor-sections, because they are closely linked to the readers' identity (ibid.). However, it has also been discovered that album reviews seldom have an impact on the sales: a bad review will not have an effect on the sales of a popular artist, and a good review will not help an unknown artist to become successful (ibid.).

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

3.1 Previous research on album reviews

Album reviews have been studied from various perspectives. In this section I am going to present some of the ways, which I believe are meaningful to my own study.

Ruuska (2006) has examined Finnish music magazines (*Rondo*, *Rumba*, *Rytmi* and *Soundi*). In his study he investigates the professional identities of critics and the different ways of writing that can

be seen in different magazines, as well as the typical structure and content of album reviews.

Schaap (2015) has investigated how (semi-) professional critics evaluate albums made by white and nonwhite rock artists and how the albums differ in their reception. Based on his data of 66 albums with half of them recorded by white groups and the other half by nonwhite groups, he found out that nonwhite artists tend to get lower evaluations as opposed to their white counterparts, especially from consumer critics. Nonwhite artists also get evaluated in different terms than whites: instead of paying attention to their individual skills, they are often compared to other nonwhite bands, even if the similarities are only superficial.

Desler (2013) has investigated canon formation in popular music, in other words, what does it take for an artist or a band to achieve the legendary status. She focuses on the reception history of Queen, and argues that some of the features, in other words, transcendence and historical importance that are demanded of a band or an artist in order to be accepted in the canon, are problematic when it comes to new music, as it takes some time for music to be viewed in a different light. She states that instead of these features, critics mostly look for authenticity when assessing new music.

I will present some of Desler's findings on Queen's reception history in a little more detail in the following section.

3.2 Previous research on Queen

Despite their huge popularity, not much academic research has been conducted on Queen (Akkanen, 2005: 11). Plenty of biographies and other sorts of books have been written about Queen, but studies on the band have been ignored at least in historical research (2005: 11).

According to Akkanen the reason why Queen have been neglected in academic research stems from the fact that the band were openly positive about the commercialism surrounding rock music, and their artistic ambition, tidy appearance and nonpolitical views were seen as a contrast to rebellious punk and punk-oriented researchers and journalists (2005: 11).

Desler (2013), who I have already mentioned, has studied music criticism and the reception history of Queen in the popular mainstream and therefore her findings are very relevant to the present study as I am studying album reviews on Queen's *A Day At The Races*. Desler divides the history of Queen's critical reception into three stages. To begin with, the band's debut album got mixed

reviews, then the reviews started to become more positive until 1975 after which reviews took a turn to the worse. After Freddie Mercury's death in 1991 Queen started to become more accepted among critics (2013: 392). Desler's findings are especially interesting to me since I am studying an album that was released in 1976, which is the year the reviews started to get more negative.

4. QUEEN

Queen are a British band that was formed in 1970. The members of the band were Freddie Mercury (lead vocals, piano), Brian May (guitar, vocals), Roger Taylor (drums, vocals) and John Deacon (bass guitar). Each member of the band wrote songs, even though Mercury and May were the main writers. The band released fifteen studio albums between 1973 and 1995 and their worldwide record sales are estimated to be well over one hundred million copies, making Queen one of the most popular groups in history (Akkanen, 2005). According to Primi (2010) the band's albums, singles and DVDs had sold globally three hundred million copies by 2010. That being said, the band enjoys worldwide success and keeps influencing new generations of listeners and aspiring musicians.

Akkanen has described the style of the band as multicoloured mosaic of different genres of popular and even classical music (Akkanen, 2005: 9). The band started with Led Zeppelin type of heavy rock, but they also experimented with the genre of music hall and absurd lyrics. By the 1980s the band had experimented with almost every possible genre; however, they still remained faithful to their roots, that is 1970s hard rock (ibid.).

4.1 QUEEN IN THE EARLY 1970s

As the present study focuses on a Queen album that was released in the mid-1970s, it is necessary to give some background information about the band's early days, which will make it easier to understand how Queen were viewed in the press.

Even though Queen was formed already in 1970, the band did not get to release their debut album until 1973 (Jackson, 2002: 59). By that time glam rock (Shuker, 1998: 151) had started to become a huge phenomenon in Britain, which had the band worrying since their first album and current look was glam rock-inspired and gave the impression of Queen jumping on the bandwagon (Jackson, 2002: 60). However, despite the popularity of the current trend in rock music, it took some time for Queen to rise to fame.

From the very beginning Queen laid strong emphasis on visual side of things. Mercury had not been impressed by the stage presence of May and Taylor's earlier band *Smile* and suggested a more theatrical approach with big movements and posing. Queen also adopted a black and white dress sense and started to have their stage outfits specially made (Jackson, 2002: 68).

All that extravaganza was something new and different, even though Queen were not the only ones to put such emphasis on their appearances. Queen's long time publicist, Phil Symes, states about the band's early days:

"They were so confident that it often came across as being extremely arrogant. There were these four guys who played up the androgynous look with lots of make-up and black nail varnish. A lot of people couldn't handle them. The 'look' in the rock scene was tattered denims and long hair, then here comes Queen dressed in Zandra Rhodes satin threads. It was unheard of." (Stewart, 2003).

4.1.1 QUEEN AND THE PRESS

Now that the basics of the band's early days have been established, I am going to shed some light on how the band was viewed in the press from early to mid-1970s. Even though Queen eventually became adored by people all over the world, the relationship between the band and the press was not very amicable to say the least, and the situation remained the same throughout their career (Purvis, 2007: 7). The band did get some excellent reviews too (for example from *Rolling Stone* on their first album) but they certainly were no strangers to extreme criticism and verbal abuse. In the following section I will present some theories why Queen were disliked by the press.

Once the final line-up of Queen was established in 1971, the band started intensive rehearsals lasting for several months (Jackson, 2002: 45). When they finally emerged from near obscurity, many regarded them as a manufactured hype band, but according to the band's then-publicist Tony Brainsby the resentment towards the band stemmed from the fact that their management put a lot of financial support behind them and he managed to get the band a lot of exposure (Jackson, 2002: 64).

The quote above by Symes sums up rather well the band's early days and the kind of image Queen transmitted. Brian May has often talked about the band's huge self-confidence that was necessary to make it (e.g. Jackson 2002: 35) but the press were not impressed by what they saw as arrogance. By mid-1970s the band was seen as pompous and pretentious because of their uncommon methods they used to create their own sound (Purvis, 2007: 7).

Akkanen (2005:13) has also addressed the issue. He states that even though Queen are generally accepted, they are also accused of being commercial, pompous and pretentious. Especially in the 1970s, rock music had to be political in order to be credible. Instead of making political statements, Queen focused on recording, touring and entertaining people, which did not please everyone.

After receiving so much criticism on their music and non-music related matters, Queen eventually started to become unwilling to talk to the press at all and as a result they were seen even more conceited (Jackson 2002: 75). Freddie Mercury discussed his willingness to receive fair criticism in 1974, but as the band continued to receive reviews from people who had not delved into their music well enough, he eventually stopped talking to the press altogether (Purvis 2007: 7).

Finally TV presenter Bob Harris has argued that the hate towards the band stemmed from the fact that the press had difficulties with putting Queen into any category, which made them feel inadequate (Jackson, 2002: 64). According to him, the British press are also generally spiteful and they take great joy in attacking celebrities. Even after Queen became big, the press still treated them badly because of that mentality (ibid.).

4.1.2 A DAY AT THE RACES

A Day At The Races is Queen's fifth album released late 1976. Like its predecessor, the 1975 album *A Night At The Opera*, the album took its name from a Marx Brothers film and the album cover arts are also similar (Purvis, 2007: 40). That was a conscious decision made by the band and as the material for both albums was written more or less at the same time, Brian May explained that *A Day At The Races* was meant to be an extension of *A Night At The Opera* rather than its successor (Jackson, 2002: 100). However, due to the obvious similarities between the layout of the albums, the band was accused of repeating a well-worn formula (Purvis, 2007: 40).

There are ten songs on the album: four written by Mercury, four by May, one by Taylor and one by Deacon. Compared to *A Night At The Opera*, the overall atmosphere of the album is lighter and more optimistic (Primi, 2010: 73). Love is a central theme on the album and for example all of Mercury's four compositions are love songs. (Kuhmonen (2015) has investigated love themes in the lyrics of Freddie Mercury). The album went to number one in the UK and number two in the US after its release (Doherty 2011: 28).

As to the album of my choice, I chose *A Day At The Races* because I know it thoroughly. *A Night At The Opera* was universally praised (Purvis, 2007: 39) and it is often seen as Queen's masterpiece (Akkanen: 9). As a result *A Day At The Races* is often overshadowed by *A Night At The Opera*. What I find interesting is the situation under which *A Day At The Races* was recorded and reviewed. After *A Night At The Opera* Queen were finally on top but in order to stay there, any artist or band has to keep on releasing top albums and maybe try something new. Due to the similarities between the two albums, it seemed to some critics (e.g. the reviewer of the album in *Washington Post*) that the band had decided to take the easy way and merely repeated a successful formula.

5. THE PRESENT STUDY

In the following section I will present the aim of the study and the research question. After that I will introduce the data and the method I used to analyse it.

5.1 Research aim and question

The aim of the present research is to investigate reviews written on Queen's *A Day At The Races* album and find out some common features in them.

In my analysis, I aim to answer the following question:

1. What are the recurring themes in reviews on Queen's *A Day At The Races* album written by six different critics?

5.2 Data and methods

In order to answer the question above, I am using a qualitative research method, which I will present later in this section.

5.2.1 DATA COLLECTION AND SELECTION

The data was collected in late January to early February 2017. I started the whole process by reading every review I could find on *A Day At The Races* on different music magazine websites. I

also delved into my own music magazines, such as *Uncut* and *Mojo* that contained album reviews. In the end I chose six reviews altogether: three from the 1970s and three from 2000s. Because of the band's popularity, album reviews from different time periods were quite easy to find, however, I could not get hold of all the reviews I wanted because some of them could only be accessed on websites behind a paywall. Still, I managed to find numerous reviews on the album, but only chose six because of the limited nature of this study. I chose the reviews based on a couple of factors: first of all, they have been published in magazines or official websites and therefore they are not written by just anyone, in other words, they are written by professional critics.

Another common factor in the reviews I chose is that the contents of the album are discussed to a great extent, unlike in some of the reviews I omitted, because they were too short or focused on other matters than the songs, such as the band's stage show.

Even though three of the reviews are from the 1970s and three from the 2000s, in this study I am not interested in making comparisons between how differently or similarly the album is reviewed during different time periods. I was not able to find any reviews on the album written in the 1980s or 1990s, so I simply had to settle for the ones I could access. In fact, I do not think there are that many professional reviews written on *A Day At The Races* during the 1980s and 1990s, as the band was still recording new music then and critics naturally focused on reviewing those albums. Having stopped their recording career in the 1990s, the band's albums are now reviewed retrospectively, and such reviews can be found in abundance.

The reviews I chose for the present study were published in the following magazines: *New Musical Express (NME)* (18.12.76), *Washington Post* (02.07.1977) and *Circus* (1977). *NME* is a British magazine whereas the latter two are American magazines. Two of the more recent reviews were published on websites: one of them on the band's official website queenonline.com (2011) and the other one on Queen archives-website (15.10.2004), which has interviews, articles and reviews from different time periods of the band's career. The third review is from the *Uncut* magazine (2015).

5.2.2 Method of analysis

For this study I chose data based content analysis as a method of analysis, as it focuses on the content and what is said in the text, as opposed to discourse analysis which is concerned with how something is said. The data was analysed using Tuomi & Sarajärvi's (2009) method of three stages

which are: (1) reducing, (2) clustering and (3) abstracting. Once I had selected the final reviews, I focused on the most interesting and relevant parts, ignoring matters that were not significant within this study. Then I started to look for some often recurring similarities and differences in the reviews, marking different themes with different colours and seeing how they are related.

6. ANALYSIS

In the following section, I will present my findings and answer my research question.

I managed to find four recurring themes in the reviews, which are: (1) comparisons to the band's previous album, (2) comparisons to other bands or artists, (3) the amount of attention certain songs receive and (4) similarities and differences in how certain songs are described. It is very likely that with a greater amount of data more categories could have been made, but in this study I only focus on four of the most notable themes I found in these six reviews.

6.1 Comparisons to the band's previous album

The most often recurring theme when reading reviews on *A Day At The Races* is how often it is compared to *A Night At The Opera*. The comparisons could also be seen in many reviews I read, but did not choose for this study, and it seems that it is practically impossible to talk about *A Day At The Races* without mentioning *A Night At The Opera*. It is understandable since the titles of the albums are similar as well as the cover arts, and as a result comparisons are easily made as can be seen in the following extracts:

"It takes only a glance at the cover of "A Day at the Races" to determine the choice they made. Like its predecessor, the fifth Queen album take its title from a Marx Brothers movie [...]. What's more, the album artwork is virtually identical to that of "A Night at the Opera," with the color scheme merely being reversed". (*Washington Post*, 1977).

"*A Day At The Races* is seen, for better and worse, as the companion album to *A Night At The Opera*. Both, of course, are named after Marx Brothers films, while the black *Races* sleeve serves as a negative imprint of *Opera's* gatefold". (*Uncut: The Ultimate Music Guide*, 2015).

As I have already mentioned, the songs on *A Day At The Races* and *A Night At The Opera* were written more or less the at the same time, and as a result some similarities between the two albums can be heard. *Washington Post* review (1977) claims that "musically, the situation is much the same". The review on *queenonline.com* states that on *A Day At The Races* the band deliver the same winning formula. The *Uncut* review, on the other hand, claims that *A Day At The Races* sounds slicker and more refined than *A Night At The Opera*. However, *Uncut* also compares plenty of songs

on *A Day At The Races* to songs that were released a year before (e.g. *A Night At The Opera's* "Love Of My Life" sounds like *A Day At The Races'* "You Take My Breath Away"), and argues that *A Day At The Races* uses the same formula as their previous album, with Taylor singing one of his songs and Deacon providing one composition as usual, to name some examples. Also the queenonline review makes some comparisons between the songs on the two albums (e.g. *A Night At The Opera's* "39" sounds like *A Day At The Races'* "Long Away").

The *Uncut* magazine claims, quite rightly so, that the reason why *A Day At The Races* is generally seen as inferior to *A Night At The Opera* is down to the fact that it does not have "Bohemian Rhapsody" which was a huge hit on the band's previous album. "The Millionaire Waltz" (from *A Day At The Races*) is compared to "Bohemian Rhapsody" in the reviews from the *Uncut*, *Washington Post*, *Circus*, and in the review on queenonline.com. "The Millionaire Waltz" is generally praised, however, *Washington Post* claims that the same studio tricks have been done before on "Bohemian Rhapsody".

Many critics call *A Day At The Races* a sequel to *A Night At The Opera*. *Washington Post* even goes as far as to predict the name of the band's sixth album based on the order of Marx Brothers films. Perhaps the most interesting point in the whole *A Night At The Opera* versus *A Day At The Races* situation is that in the more recent reviews two critics claim that *A Day At The Races* is just as good an album as *A Night At The Opera*. However, the *Queen-archives* review claims that *A Day At The Races* does not come close to the masterful *A Night At The Opera*.

6.2 Comparisons to other bands and artists

In the beginning of Queen's career, critics struggled with trying to put the band's music into a category. Not only were the songs on *A Day At The Races* compared to Queen's earlier material, but critics also compared Queen and *A Day At The Races* to various other bands and artists, which I will present here.

When Queen got publicity in 1973 with their debut album, they were, sometimes rather unfavourably, compared to Led Zeppelin. In fact, while they were still trying to get a record contract, they were often rejected due to the fact that the music world did not need another Led Zeppelin (Jackson, 2002: 50). Led Zeppelin comparisons continued for many years after that and they can also be seen in these reviews:

"Ere but, wait a sec, Bri, that riff - I've heard that before somewheres. Led Zeppelin's "When The

Levee Breaks", to be exact, which Jimmy Page took from (and co-credited to) one Memphis Minnie, a wonderful black person". (*NME*, 1976).

"Though they've often been suggested as the group that will eventually end Led Zeppelin's heavy metal supremacy - and on "Tie Your Mother Down" have even issued a challenge by mockingly mimicking one of Led Zeppelin's most famous numbers - Queen draws almost equally on lush, McCartneyesque melodies and the traditions of the English dance hall". (*Washington Post*, 1977).

The last part of the quote above brings forth Queen's versatility. Paul McCartney and the Beatles are both mentioned a couple of times in the reviews, and *Long Away*, in particular, is often said to sound like The Beatles (and the Byrds, an American rock band formed in the 1960s). That particular song will be presented in a little more detail in the final section titled "similarities and differences in how the songs are described".

In addition to the heavy side of Led Zeppelin, one song on *A Day At The Races*, "White Man" is compared to Black Sabbath, another heavy rock band (n.b. Led Zeppelin also have plenty of acoustic songs). "White Man" is said to have "medieval-sounding Black Sabbath style parallel fifths". As I have already mentioned, *A Day At The Races* is a lighter album than its predecessor and in fact it only has two straightforward rock songs, "Tie Your Mother Down" (which is said to have Ian Hunter-type of enunciations, courtesy of Mercury) and "White Man". The rest of the album is rather light and even pop-oriented: Deacon's composition "You and I" is said to resemble Beach Boys and Brian Wilson (Queen archives-website). *The Circus* magazine makes probably the most interesting comparisons to other public figures:

"At last, the singer has achieved vocal chops of breathless effervescence. Which means he sounds like Marilyn Monroe in *Bus Stop* or Sarah Bernhardt with emphysema". (*Circus*, 1977).

As can be seen, Queen are compared to various bands and artists with completely different styles. This only goes to show how versatile *A Day At The Races* is: the album has its heavy moments, but also plenty of lightness and humour.

6.3 The amount of attention certain songs receive

One of the reasons why I chose these reviews was that the songs are given a great deal of attention. In many cases, certain songs are mentioned in every review and in some cases discussed at length, most notably "Tie Your Mother Down", the opening track of the album and "Somebody To Love", the album's first single, which was released before the album. Still, it is rather notable that certain

songs are not given that much attention and those songs are "You and I" and "Drowse". Compared to the songs that are mentioned and often discussed at length in all the six reviews ("Tie Your Mother Down", "Long Away", "The Millionaire Waltz", "Somebody To Love" and "White Man") Taylor's "Drowse" is only mentioned three times and Deacon's "You and I" four times and when they are mentioned, the mentions are not very flattering:

"I'd mention the other two contributions (one by bassist John Deacon: facile, over-cute, over-cooked and another by drummer Taylor: not a bad effort actually. Soft strumming: decent lyrics) but oh see, I just have".
(*NME*, 1976).

"The weaker moments? Deacon's composition, "You and I", might be a decent guilty pleasure, but it's not a patch on "You're My Best Friend". Taylor's falsetto voice and songwriting always remained an acquired taste [...]"
(*Uncut*, 2015).

It has to be said that up until *A Day At The Races*, Mercury and May had been the main songwriters in the band. Starting with their first album, Taylor had written one song per album, whereas Deacon started his songwriting process on their third album, also contributing one song. It is highly likely that as main writers, May and Mercury were, and probably still are, given most attention when it comes to Queen songs. Taylor and Deacon were both to write number one hits some years later, but they are often left in the shadow of Mercury and May, especially in the early reviews.

6.4 Similarities and differences in how certain songs are described

Even though this theme only concerns two songs, I find it so interesting that I had to give it its own category. In this section I am going to focus on "Long Away" and "White Man" and present how similarly and differently they are described.

"Long Away", the album's third track, is sung and written by May. It is generally a well-liked song. *Circus* magazine calls it the album's strongest and least tricked-up track. Even *NME*, which panned the album, calls it a fairly decent folk-rock with a pleasant melody, although the critic is not impressed with the guitar tone. Interestingly, "Long Away" is compared very similarly and to the same bands, The Beatles and The Byrds, in four reviews out of six:

"Long Away", another May Tune, is fairly decent folk-rock - a jingle jangling guitar nod of the plectrum to The Byrds and a pleasant "pop" melody, even if May's classic strangled Ostrich guitar tone (which he uses for all solos performed in the upper register of the fretboard) doesn't add anything". (*NME*, 1976).

”“Long Away” is an affectionate recreation of the mid-'60s Beatles/Byrds sound”. (*Washington Post*, 1977).

”May's "Long Away" is *Races's* strongest and least tricked-up track. It's a haunting Beatles/Byrds amalgam, all shimmering electric 12-strings and aching harmony”. (*Circus*, 1977).

”Retro inclinations are also indulged by ”Long Away”, which is as close as Queen ever got to a full-on Beatles tribute. May achieves a *Rubber Soul*-era Rickenbacker jangle using a Burns 12-string, putting together the kind of plagal cadences that became John Lennon's trademark, while Mercury contributes to some Fab Four-style harmonies”. (*Uncut*, 2015).

As can be seen, the comparisons are made in all the older reviews. It is rather understandable, since at that point the 1960s were only a decade behind and The Beatles, in particular, were still a big influence on many bands. I find it quite interesting how similarly different critics can write about a certain song, without probably being aware of each other's reviews.

”White Man”, on the other hand, divides opinions among critics as can be seen in these extracts:

”The *piece de resistance* though is hilarious. Called "White Man", it's an absurdly ham-brained attack on...well you guessed it, our fair-skinned predecessors' predilection for carnage and rip-offis (sic) against Ethnic Folks of other inscrutable tints”. (*NME*, 1976).

”The slide guitar-powered "White Man" can be dismissed on grounds of heavy-handed lyrics”. (*Washington Post*, 1977).

”‘White Man’ is the most powerful track on the album, both musically and thematically. It is rare example of a Queen song with a political message. In this case, Brian May’s attack on the ruthless European settlers who colonised The Americas, told from a Native American’s point of view. ‘White Man’ is immensely compelling and the lyrics remain relevant today”. (*queenonline.com*, 2011).

”One of the heavier songs is the mournful "White Man" about the fate of American Indians, sort of topical for these guys, who generally don't delve into social issues. I really like this song, but it feels out of place among the more upbeat numbers”. (*Queen archives*, 2004).

”The lyrics to ”White Man” - May's rather clunky tribute to Native American culture – may have dated badly...”. (*Uncut*, 2015).

As can be seen, the lyrics to ”White Man” are given a lot of attention, and they are either praised (*queenonline.com*) or dismissed (in the other extracts). Perhaps the most interesting point here is how differently two recent reviews (*queenonline* and *Uncut*) describe the lyrics. According to the *queenonline* review from 2011, the lyrics to ”White Man” are still relevant today, whereas *Uncut* (2015) states that the lyrics have dated badly. In the context of the otherwise light album, ”White Man” does seem like the odd one out, as *Queen archives* states.

7. CONCLUSION

In this thesis I investigated six professional reviews written on Queen's *A Day At The Races* album. My aim was to find some common features in them and I managed to find four recurring themes which are: (1) comparisons to the band's previous album, (2) comparisons to other bands or artists, (3) the amount of attention certain songs receive and (4) similarities and differences in how certain songs are described. The data was analysed using data based content analysis and Tuomi and Sarajärvi's (2009) method of reducing, clustering and abstracting the data.

Based on these six reviews I found out that it is practically impossible to write about *A Day At The Races* without mentioning *A Night At The Opera*. *A Night At The Opera* is seen as the original masterpiece and *A Day At The Races* as a sequel. The songs on *A Day At The Races* are often compared to those on *A Night At The Opera*, and in some cases critics claim that they do not come close to the material on the band's previous album. However, two of the more recent reviews claim that *A Day At The Races* is just as good as *A Night At The Opera*. It may be that only recently enough time has passed to view *A Day At The Races* as a strong individual. Music cannot be created in a vacuum, and therefore it is rather obvious that sometimes different pieces of music sound alike or resemble something that has already been created. In these six reviews Queen are compared to various bands and artists, which shows how versatile their music is.

It is quite obvious that not every theme I found would recur in every review, as the reviews were written by six different people. However, it is rather surprising that the reviews were this similar (for example *Long Away* is described very similarly in four reviews out of six) and the critics wrote about certain matters very similarly.

Even though I chose the reviews from different time periods for practical reasons (that is, they were the ones I could access and they were long enough) and not because I was making comparisons between the older and more recent reviews, I noticed that the reviews from the 2000s were more positive in general than the ones from the 1970s. This is in line with Desler's (2013) study on canon formation in popular music, according to which it takes time for a band to achieve the legendary status and be viewed differently by critics. By late 1976 Queen were a fairly new group that had only released five albums, some of which were praised, and others that were severely criticized. When dealing with new bands, critics focus on the authenticity of the band's music (Desler, 2013). This may be the root of the mixed reviews Queen got, as their early lyrics were fantasy themed and therefore probably not seen as authentic or something people can relate to. As I have already

mentioned, Frith (1988: 186) has made similar arguments, stating that pop/rock music is "wrong" if it does not embody youth culture. Even though I did not focus on these matters in this thesis, I think that this is an interesting finding and should be researched more in the future. Also, anyone interested in album reviews could investigate how reviews on a certain band's or artist's music differ or change over time.

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