

You Can Be a Rock Snob in Seven Easy Lessons

by DON AKCHIN

Malcolm is a dear friend, but not a true musical sophisticate. He gave it his best shot the other night. It fell short.

"You haven't heard this album?" he said. "Great stuff! Let me play you this one cut." Malcolm removed the disc from its jacket, carefully slipped it onto the turntable, squinted, and dropped the needle precisely into the proper groove. "Listen carefully to the words," Malcolm advised. "He's talking about all the things musicians do while they're on the road. It's a concept album," he added. "It's all about being a musician."

Poor Malcolm. I tried to smile graciously, but I was not very convincing. It was such an embarrassment, watching him mimic the motions perfectly only to botch up the content. There is absolutely nothing classy about turning a friend on to an album, such as Jackson Browne's *Running on Empty*, that's in the Top 10. Really, I had been hearing bits of it on the radio for weeks—and not FM, mind you, but AM, the lowest common denominator.

Jackson Browne is common knowledge. The essence of musical sophistication, on the other hand, is uncommon knowledge—the obscure album, the unknown artist. Contrast Malcolm's technique with my own:

"Have you heard this album?" I say, holding one up for viewing. "No," says Malcolm, "who is it?"

"Warren Zevon," I say. "He's written some songs for Linda Ronstadt, like 'Poor Poor Pitiful Me.'"

"Yeah, that's a good song," says Malcolm.

"Listen to this one," I say, and drop the needle. Then I sit back and wait. Zevon sings a warped little ditty called "Werewolves of London." It knocks Malcolm's socks off. Before he can recover from the shock I hit him with "Desperados Under the Eaves" and "Roland the Headless Thompson

Gunner." By evening's end, I have converted Malcolm into an admirer of both Warren Zevon's songs and my own avant-garde musical taste.

Musical sophistication looks easy.

It is not. It is a difficult and challenging art form that few can master. My own command of it was the result of years of practice.

I have dedicated myself to scouting out the talented unknowns of our time and being among the first to herald their hidden greatness. I am performing a service, an educational mission: spreading the news to the uninitiated, bringing new light to the lives of the less lit.

I have little use for music that is already popular, not even the music of formerly obscure artists I helped promote to popular stardom. I am more interested in music that is known only to small cults. It is my obligation to stay ahead of the popular taste.

1 Gather leads from many sources.

Discovering new talent is a bit like detective work. I gather clues from many varied sources, compare notes, look for patterns and supplement my information with an intuition honed by experience.

Every sophisticate develops a personal method. My own often begins with record reviews in *Rolling Stone*, *New Times* and *The Village Voice*. These are helpful in keeping abreast of new releases. Word of mouth is useful when it comes from trusted friends with high standards of taste and proven good judgment. Employees of campus and commercial radio stations are a particularly valuable source of information (and records). Radio broadcasts cannot be ignored either. I listen to progressive FM stations at home, jotting down notes of interesting songs for later follow-up. In my car I use AM to keep posted on what's commercially successful. FM tells me whom to buy; AM tells me whom to ditch.

2 Specialize in one aspect of music and follow it to new leads and discoveries.

Specialization in, say, studio musicians, or record producers, can provide a handle for tracking down new talent. My own specialization is songwriters—a most fortunate choice for the Seventies, when singer/songwriters have had a real field day. Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Kenny Loggins, Carole King, Randy Newman and Karla Bonoff are among those who were known for their writing

before they were known for their vocal performances. I particularly lean to songwriters who set Gestalt psychology to music. It hits me where I live.

One of my best songwriter finds has been John David Souther, and I use him to illustrate how specialization can work. Souther remains relatively unknown, despite two solo albums, two albums with the Souther-Hillman-Furay Band, and earlier work with Longbranch Pennywhistle. But everybody has heard Souther songs sung by Linda Ronstadt: "Don't Cry Now," "Prisoner in Disguise," "Simple Man, Simple Dream," "Silver Blue," "Faithless Love," and "The Fast One." Reading songwriter credits on Ronstadt albums was how I discovered him, not surprisingly. Because his songs, if not his name, are familiar, they are an ideal reference point to use in introducing Souther, the artist, to friends.

3 Do not specialize in one style of music.

Do not confuse specialization in one aspect of music with specialization in one musical style. The former is useful, the latter disastrous. It is crucial to keep an open mind and not ignore everything except, for example, reggae. If your musical spectrum runs the gamut from Bob Marley to Burning Spear, you are far too narrow to be a true sophisticate; you are merely a reggae fanatic. If reggae goes out of fashion (or has it already?), your specialized knowledge is devalued sharply.

Early in my career I made the mistake of overspecializing. The genre I chose, country-rock, was fortunately a productive and major one, rising from obscurity to prominence to dominance, to my delight and disgust. But in my enthusiasm I narrowed my focus and closed out all else. As a result, I was far behind on another great genre of the time, jazz-rock. In retrospect I can see that the opportunities were there, but I missed them. Two of my college roommates were getting into jazz, and one even had a Grover Washington, Jr. album back in 1973. (This year Grover Washington, Jr. has an album in the Top 20, and my former roommate's reputation for taste-making is at an all-time high.) But by the time I awoke from my country-rock trance, it was too late. Jazz-rock was already gaining popularity. All I could do to cover myself was buy a few token Steely Dan albums and drop Chick Corea's name in conversations. During that same period, I also jeopardized my standing by ignoring

Yes, Emerson

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