

Best Practices for Writing an Album Review

CFRC is seeking volunteer program hosts to write reviews of albums they love and also share on their own programs. The station will publish your album reviews on its website, its community newsletters, and also share on its social media platforms. We would love to see reviews of new local releases in particular, but welcome any review of any new release that you want to discuss.

Interested? Before starting with the how, WHY do an album review? The answer is simple!

Reviews help readers get a sense of what to expect on a new release before they have even had a chance to listen and many read and use album reviews as deciding factors as to whether they wish to purchase the music and/or attend concerts.

Further, reviews allow YOU, the reviewer, to share your own experience of the new release in your own voice. More specifically, developing this skill set is crucial in broadcast radio-learning to write reviews allows you to develop authoritative knowledge that you can convey to your listeners on the airwaves confidently. Rather than saying 'this song has good vibes' (which tells people nothing), you can learn to talk more meaningfully about your musical presentations on air. This can help build your audience's confidence in you as a CFRC Radio Host who not only presents fantastic music, but can speak intelligently about it in a fun, friendly, engaging and accessible manner.

There is no specific set of standards to follow when writing album reviews. If anything, it's best to write in your own way and in your own words and perspectives. Also, while being a musician certainly has its advantages, you do not need to be a musician in order to review new music. What you do need is a good ear and attention to details :)

Below are some best practices you may wish to mobilize when crafting your own album review. These are meant to be helpful hints you are free to follow. The key is that you present your review in a way that is meaningful to you.

One important step in the process is to *do the research* about the musician/band. Some items that are good to know are:

- Where they are from;
- Details on their back catalogue (if any);
- Recent shows/tours/collaborations/festival appearances, awards won or for which they have been nominated/shortlisted;
- Who are the band members and what do they each play;
- What are the band's self-described influences and genre notes;
- Release details including label (or if self-released) and the date

- Other notations that emerge from the band's website, social media, and press kits found on label websites or sent to the station (talk to [Chancellor](#) who can help source these if sent to the station).

With some knowledge in place, you can then sit down with the album itself. Listen through the album a couple of times. On your second listen, start writing down some notes, especially about those tracks you want to hear again and hit repeat/rewind to do so. Note why it compelled you to play it back again.

Once you've listened to the album a couple of times and gathered some notes, think about what the goal of your review will be before you get started and write some more notes- Did you love the album? Do you think it's particularly groundbreaking? Or conversely, is there an aspect of the album that you did not enjoy (if so, be clear and fair in your critique)? Do you want your audience to buy and listen to the album and attend the band's shows? Why or why not?

Further, you may wish to capture responses to some overarching questions:

- How does the album distinguish itself in the genre? Be explicit in your description of distinguishing details about the music itself in context of the album's own trajectory and position in the genre
- Do you get a sense of an overarching theme? How do the songs, and their sequence in the album line up to tell a story, if at all? Notably, if you've read the press kits and see there is a theme lyrically, compositionally, or by song arrangement, does the music actually match what the press kit says?

Get writing! Start drafting your review in a coherent manner that allows you to tell a story about the album and your experience of it. Other elements that you may wish to consider in your review include:

- Identifying how the album makes you feel. Try to identify how you feel with particular tracks and what elements of those tracks made you feel that way (ie: compelling lyrics, hair tingling instrumentals?). Note that reviews done in this manner are quite subjective but are also acceptable.
- Another more objective method is to dive into describing the actual music and the level to which elements like rhythm, harmony & melody, tempo & timbre, pitch or even sheer intensity excel in the work alongside other elements including lyrics and mixing/mastering/post-production skill.
- Is there a track that's not working for you? Try to identify what doesn't work (ie: tempo? Instrumentals? Lyrics that don't suit the melody?) Note that such qualifiers can be strongly objected to as your opinion may not be that of your reader :)
- You can certainly use comparisons, but don't go overboard....does the band remind you of another band's catalogue? This may help readers get a sense of sound before they even hear it but be restrained and realistic with comparative assessments.

Do keep in mind that while CFRC will publish your album reviews, you do not need to write like you are doing tryouts for Pitchfork. Use your own words and perspectives to develop a good solid story about the album's concept and your evaluations of it.

Finally, you're also encouraged to practice outside of your own comfort zone! Are you a huge EDM fan, a fiddle-lovin' folkster, or you generally only get down with blues rock or country ditties? That's totally ok! If you tend to 'stay in your lane' with particular genres, a really great way to learn to really assess music is to listen to something that's not something you generally listen to due to your preferred tastes. You can spend more time listening to instrumentation, chord progression, lyrics while learning something new about a genre to which you are not already accustomed. Even if you don't 'like' the music because it's not your jam, you can still learn to speak intelligently about the music on a new release and assess it based on the music in and of itself. Ultimately, album reviews are an exercise that can translate into a more informed presentation of the music you actually love listening to and presenting on your own CFRC program.
