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Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music

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In 1968, the *New Yorker* hired Ellen Willis as its first popular music critic. Her column, Rock, Etc., ran for seven years and established Willis as a leader in cultural commentary and a pioneer in the nascent and otherwise male-dominated field of rock criticism. As a writer for a magazine with a circulation of nearly half a million, Willis was also the country's most widely read rock critic. With a voice at once sharp, thoughtful, and ecstatic, she covered a wide range of artists—Bob Dylan, The Who, Van Morrison, Elvis Presley, David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Joni Mitchell, the Velvet Underground, Sam and Dave, Bruce Springsteen, and Stevie Wonder—assessing their albums and performances not only on their originality, musicianship, and cultural impact but also in terms of how they made her feel.

Because Willis stopped writing about music in the early 1980s—when, she felt, rock 'n' roll had lost its political edge—her significant contribution to the history and reception of rock music has been overshadowed by contemporary music critics like Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs, and Dave Marsh. *Out of the Vinyl Deeps* collects for the first time Willis's Rock, Etc. columns and her other writings about popular music from this period (includingliner notes for works by Lou Reed and Janis Joplin) and reasserts her rightful place in rock music criticism.

More than simply setting the record straight, *Out of the Vinyl Deeps* reintroduces Willis's singular approach and style—her use of music to comment on broader social and political issues, critical acuity, vivid prose, against-the-grain opinions, and distinctly female (and feminist) perspective—to a new generation of readers. Featuring essays by the *New Yorker*'s current popular music critic, Sasha Frere-Jones, and cultural critics Daphne Carr and Evie Nagy, this volume also provides a lively and still relevant account of rock music during, arguably, its most innovative period.

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