

AMERICA'S GREATEST ROCK CRITIC A Corpus Stylistics Investigation on Lester Bangs's Texts

GILBERTO GIANNACCHI
UNIVERSITÀ DELL'INSUBRIA

Abstract – Lester Bangs is considered one of the most influential figures in rock journalism. His writing, which conveyed acute observations on Western popular music, was characterized by a highly personal blend of first-person immersion, the use of literary personas, and direct engagement with the reader. This paper investigates Bangs's idiosyncratic style with a corpus-stylistics approach, seeking to shed light on his favored linguistic devices and the broader sociocultural environment of the music press, both vastly understudied areas in applied linguistics. The analysis was carried out on a sample corpus comprising articles authored by Lester Bangs (68 texts, ~137,000 words, ~16,000 tokens). This study systematically identified Bangs's stylistic choices in presenting speech and thought using Semino and Short's model (2004). The corpus was annotated using CATMA 7.1 (Meister 2023), which permits text-external annotation with customized tagsets. The findings indicated that Bangs consistently employed free direct speech (FDS), accounting for 28% of all annotated instances of speech and thought presentation. Bangs extensively used FDS as a stylistic trademark to emulate speech, thus building his literary personas and mirroring his influences from Beat prose. (Free) indirect thought is also prominent, allowing Bangs to engage in self-reflection. Bangs's peculiar writings offer an entry point into the style of music journalism, a peculiar combination of cultural critique and aesthetic commentary suitable for multidisciplinary frameworks in the humanities.

Keywords: Lester Bangs; music press; applied linguistics; corpus linguistics; stylistics.

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes Lester Bangs's writings using a corpus linguistics framework. The corpus investigation systematically identifies and evaluates the author's recurring stylistic patterns, shedding light on his writing techniques and discursive features. The American critic Lester Bangs (1948–1982) is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in rock journalism (Berthomier 2024; DeRogatis 2001). His personality was multifaceted, characterized by substance abuse and personal struggles during

childhood.¹ While an editor at *Creem* and *Rolling Stone* in the 1970s, he exhibited erratic behavior, including drunken stupors and a confrontational attitude toward rock stars (e.g., Lou Reed). However, Bangs also demonstrated acute engagement with popular music and culture in his writings (Jones and Featherly 2002). His premature death from an accidental overdose cemented his cult status in American culture (DeRogatis 2001).

Bangs's writings mirrored the "kind, magnetic, righteous, outrageously funny, and occasionally frustrating man behind his persona" (DeRogatis 2001, p. xiv). Drawing influence from Beat poetry, he crafted a style that emulated the disruptiveness and vitality of rock 'n' roll, thus detaching himself from the academic tone of contemporaries such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus. His background as a budding novelist resulted in a highly distinctive style, blurring the lines between fiction and cultural commentary. For these reasons, he is also associated with the New Journalism movement (Wolfe 1973), which sought to disrupt the traditional rules of journalism.

Bangs's unique style and insightful commentaries were met with acclaim by music journalists (Bustillos 2012; Flaherty 2024; Garner 2000), granting him cult status in American popular culture. The author was portrayed by Philip Seymour Hoffman in the Academy Award-nominated film *Almost Famous*. In addition, his essay *How To Be a Rock Critic* (Bangs 1974) was adapted into an Off-Broadway play in 2018. However, his cultural relevance has largely been overlooked in cultural and linguistic studies. Few scholars in cultural studies have investigated his themes in detail, such as rock music's eternal dream (Berthomier 2013; Jones and Featherly 2002) and the influence of core American myths (Berthomier 2024). Undoubtedly, additional research in culture and media studies could further explore the themes and social context associated with Bangs. However, the best gateway to understanding Bangs's engagement with popular music lies in his distinctive style, particularly his use of personas, first-person immersion, and different registers. His language encompassed every facet of his personality: the novelist, the journalist, the fan, and the provocateur. While the previously cited works provide valuable insights into Bangs's language, this aspect has not been systematically investigated from an applied linguistics perspective.

This paper aims to fill this gap using a corpus stylistics approach based on Semino and Short's *Corpus Stylistics* (2004). Their manual investigates a corpus of fiction and non-fiction texts through a text linguistics and stylistics lens (cf. Leech and Short 1981). Their revised speech, writing, and thought presentation model accounts for content, style, and effect on the reader. Bangs blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction and sought to engage

¹ Lester Bangs's biography *Let It Blurt* (DeRogatis 2001) offers valuable insight into the main constants and events of the author's childhood – his education as a Jehovah's witness and the premature and violent death of his father.

the reader with his boisterous writing, experimenting with different stylistic devices. Semino and Short's model allows for the analysis of all these aspects.

This study focuses on the presentation of speech and thought, identifying and evaluating the author's peculiar usage of these stylistic features. The analysis was conducted on a sample corpus made up of texts sourced from the online database *rocksbackpages.com*. Bangs's writings were manually annotated using CATMA 7.1 (Meister 2023), an online software based on text-external annotation. The tags and annotations adhered to Semino and Short's thought and speech presentation categories.

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on Lester Bangs's impact on music journalism and corpus stylistics, situating the paper within a multidisciplinary framework that embraces cultural studies and applied linguistics. Section 3 describes the methods employed for this study: corpus building, the selection of descriptors, and the annotation system. Some difficulties were encountered during the compilation of the corpus—i.e., selection bias, size, and balance. In addition, the annotation process involved ambiguities in the identification of stylistic categories (a problem also encountered by Semino and Short). These limitations will also be discussed. Section 4 critically evaluates Bangs's use of speech and thought presentation, focusing on his persona creation, his shifting registers, and the discursive material underpinning his writings.

2. Literature review

Bangs's production must be contextualized within the music press,² which was centered on the production of news regarding popular music³ (Jones 2002). More specifically, Bangs developed as a writer in the cultural environment of rock journalism, which started as an amateur practice in the 1960s before becoming “a staple of entertainment reporting” in the 1980s (Jones and Featherly 2002, p. 34). Music journalism differs from traditional “hard” journalism (Forde 2003) because of the evaluative and subjective nature of the articles and the lack of formal training among music journalists. Bangs, like his contemporary peers Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh, and Jann Wenner,⁴ did not receive journalistic or musical education (DeRogatis 2001). Instead, they crafted a characteristic journalistic style, consisting of high- and low-brow intertextual references (Gudmundsson *et al.* 2002) merged with

² The terms “music press” and “music journalism” will be used interchangeably.

³ Popular music is defined in this paper as mass-distributed, recorded sounds (Tagg 1982).

⁴ These authors are considered key figures for the development of music journalism (see DeRogatis 2001, Grafe and McKeown 2024, Jones 2002).

strongly subjective points of view. The music press “grew up side by side, page to page” (Jones and Featherly 2002: 38) with New Journalism (1973), which also challenged the traditional rules of objectivity and neutrality in journalism (Weingarten 2010).

Lester Bangs created his own voice in this fervent cultural landscape. His writings are based on the adoption of different literary personas (Sheinbaum 2004), using different voices and perspectives to convey his opinions on music and culture. For example, his early *Creem* reviews were characterized by misspellings and swear words, and he moved toward contemplative analysis during his time at *The Village Voice*. Despite these shifts in personas, we can trace constant themes in his production. First, he always advocated for the “gritty, grungy, gully-bottom rock and roll” (Jones and Featherly 2002, p. 34), seeking to discover new musical genres that would “keep the torch alight” (ibid., p. 34). Bangs aimed to bridge the gap between music and writing, trying to adapt rock ’n’ roll’s fury into prose. In this regard, we can draw a parallel with Kerouac’s spontaneous prose (Hunt 2014), influenced by jazz and bebop’s liveliness.

Bangs’s output occupies a liminal space between fiction and non-fiction. He approached music as a fan rather than a critic and filtered his interest through “the big social picture he perceived” (Jones and Featherly 2002, p. 26) by adopting different literary personas. Further insight into his themes and style was provided by Berthomier (2011, 2024). The researcher stated that Bangs’s lively and improvisational style differed from the more structured and collected approach of his colleagues, such as Robert Christgau (Berthomier 2011). She also underscored Bangs’s desire for the constant renewal of rock ’n’ roll, which was also noted by Jones and Featherly (2002). In a later paper, Berthomier also noted an overarching lack of nuance in Bangs’s production, which mirrored his Manichean vision of music—e.g., mainstream rock opposed to underground, rebellious music. The claims in these studies are made by commenting on excerpts from Bangs’s writings. However, none of these studies illustrate the criteria behind the selection of texts, hindering transparency and objectivity. In addition, these studies also lack a linguistic framework that could have enhanced the reliability of their claims. Bangs’s production implies stylistic and discursive angles. The author represented large cultural patterns in his writings, giving subjective representations of the events and social actors involved in the production of rock music.

Considering these issues, corpus stylistics offers tools that can account for these multiple perspectives. Corpus stylistics can summarily be defined as the study of stylistic textual features on corpora (Mahlberg 2013). This definition implies a broad range of corpus techniques applied to different text genres. Toolan (2009) conducted a keyword analysis in short stories, demonstrating how keywords contribute to the progression of the narrative.

McIntyre (2010) used corpus stylistics to investigate character distinctions in the film *Reservoir Dogs*. Stylistics has also been employed in linguistic studies of media, albeit with some theoretical differences. For instance, Molek-Kozakowska and Wilk (2021) conducted a news values stylistic analysis of a populist newsfeed corpus. The researchers noted how the casual and colloquial stylistic devices used in these newsfeeds make politics more engaging. However, in this paper, stylistics and corpus linguistics overlap without forming an interdisciplinary framework.

When approaching Lester Bangs, we must account for complex stylistic phenomena and the hybrid nature of his texts, which deviates from traditional journalism. The revised speech, writing, and thought presentation model of English writing by Semino and Short (2004) was chosen as this paper's corpus stylistics framework. The authors not only analyzed a corpus of written fiction in English, but also focused non-fiction, including journalistic language – a vastly understudied area in corpus stylistics, even to date. The authors identified the differences between novels and news reporting, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Their model expands on Leech and Short (1981), which analyzed literary texts using a text linguistics approach. Furthermore, they provide a detailed taxonomy of stylistic strategies that also have discursive implications. This corpus stylistics framework has primarily been used for literary investigations. McIntyre (2015) analyzed the occurrences of various types of speech in Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. McIntyre found that, compared to other novels, Haddon's work contained more instances of direct speech. However, he also pointed out that “statistical analysis will only take us so far in explaining the stylistic effects associated with this relative overuse” (2015, p. 64), hinting at a more qualitative interpretation based on close reading.

Semino and Short's framework can thus effectively unearth Bangs's stylistic complexities, supported by corpus linguistics' quantitative angle. This methodology involves close reading, which permits the identification of the thematic and stylistic features explored in the previous paragraphs: the influence of Beat prose, the adoption of literary personas, and his quest for the renewal of rock 'n' roll energy. Bangs's texts also have discursive value, as they involve a “set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr 1995, p. 48).

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim and research questions

This paper seeks to analyze Bangs's distinctive stylistic strategies, focusing on the presentation of speech and thought. More specifically, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How did Bangs represent speech and thought in his text?
- 2) How do different literary *personas* emerge in the author's production?
- 3) Which are Bangs's main discourses on rock music and popular culture?

The investigation is based on a corpus comprising Lester Bangs's writings, built following the methods in Egbert, Biber, and Gray (2022). The corpus analysis is based on the speech and thought presentation (S&TP) categories found in Semino and Short (2004).⁵ These categories were annotated using CATMA 7.1, after which the instances of S&TP were analyzed with a bottom-up approach (Gillings and Mautner 2023). The analysis in Section 4 illustrates three idiosyncratic features in Bangs's production: his unconventional use of free direct speech, his narrative approach, and his self-reflective demeanor.

3.2. Corpus building

For this paper, the target language domain, which can be defined as “the full universe of language use a researcher wants to learn about” (Egbert *et al.* 2022, p. 73), is Lester Bangs's written output. Unfortunately, no archive containing the author's entire production is available to date. The target domain must thus be operationalized by identifying texts suitable for inclusion in the corpus. Lester Bangs's anthologies⁶ may reflect the editor's bias in data selection, thus likely yielding an unrepresentative dataset. Similarly, *Rolling Stone's* website includes articles written by Bangs during his years as an editor. However, relying on a single source might lead to an underrepresentation of the author's literary personas, which varied according to the publication source.

Rocksbackpages.com was chosen as the operational domain. This online archive features a selection of texts written by Bangs – no editor is

⁵ For brevity, the acronym “S&TP” will replace the expression “speech and thought presentation” from now on.

⁶ See *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (Marcus 2001) and *Main Lines, Blood Feasts and Bad Taste* (Morthland 2008).

credited for selecting texts for inclusion in the archive. Furthermore, Bangs's works on *rocksbackpages.com* were originally published in different magazines over a 12-year timespan (1969–1981). These features account for the shifting stylistic and discursive characteristics of Bangs's output.

All of Bangs's texts available on the website were sampled in their entirety and saved without additional HTML annotation. Metadata were included in the file names (Table 1). The main features of the corpus are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Identifier	Name of the written piece	Year of publication
LB	A science fiction rock spectacle	1971

Table 1
Example of metadata in the .txt file names.

General information on the corpus	
Number of texts	68
Word tokens	137264
Word types	16466
Mean Length of Texts	2044.44 tokens
Timespan	1969-1981

Table 2
General information on the corpus.

Information on publication and text types	
Name of the publishing platform (number of texts)	<i>Phonograph Record</i> (15), <i>Circus</i> (10), <i>New Musical Express</i> (9), <i>Creem</i> (8), <i>Rolling Stone</i> (6), Unpublished (5), <i>Let it Rock</i> (4), <i>Musician</i> (2), <i>The Village Voice</i> (2), <i>CNT Records</i> (1), <i>Fusion</i> (1), <i>ROIR Records</i> (1), <i>Stereo Review</i> (1), <i>Shakin' Street Gazzette</i> (1), <i>Music Gig</i> (1), <i>Screw</i> (1).
Text genres (number of texts)	Album reviews (35), interviews (10), essays (6), live reviews (5), retrospectives (4), sleeve notes (3), comments (2), profiles (2), overviews (1).

Table 3
Information on publication and text types.

3.3. *Speech and thought presentation (ST&P)*

Speech and thought as stylistic categories were first analyzed by Leech and Short (1981) in literary works, then refined and expanded by Semino and Short (2004), who also accounted for non-fiction, such as newspaper writing. Both models are based on a representation scale, which compares and measures the effects caused by stylistic features on the reader.

Speech presentation provides insight into the creative strategies Bangs used to construct his literary personas. As explored in Section 4, his idiosyncratic use of free direct speech (FDS) is central to persona creation. Bangs often mimicked the characteristics of spoken language in his texts, giving his writings a spontaneous and free-flowing edge. Meanwhile, thought presentation provides insight into the (more implicit) self-reflective nature of the author and effectively pinpoints his perspectives on music and culture.

Table 4, adapted from McIntyre (2015, p. 64) shows and exemplifies the descriptors used in this investigation:

S&TP descriptors used in the investigation		
Category	Descriptor	Speech and thought presentation example
FD[S/T]	Free direct speech/thought	I'm exhausted!
D[S/T]	Direct speech/thought	He said/thought, "I'm exhausted!"
FI[S/T]	Free indirect speech/thought	He was exhausted

Table 4
Corpus stylistics descriptors used for the linguistic analysis.

3.4. *Annotation and analysis*

The descriptors in Table 4 represent a “complex and relatively ‘high-level’ discoursal phenomenon” (Semino and Short 2004, p. 26). For this reason, the researchers developed their own corpus annotation system. It consists of ad hoc text markup conventions corresponding to different stylistic presentation categories. Stylistic annotation, however, is riddled with ambiguities that can lead to uncertainties in the use of descriptors (see Semino and Short 2004, pp. 182-98). This necessitates multiple re-checks of text-internal mark-up, which can be time-consuming.

CATMA 7.1 (Meister 2023) was used to mitigate this issue. This online software is based on text-external markup. After creating a customized tagset, the corpus was annotated with text-external markup. The annotations

are not embedded in texts but saved in an external database, allowing quick and accurate corrections when necessary. Customized tags corresponding to the descriptors were created first (Annex 1), then the corpus was annotated. CATMA's interface prioritizes user-friendliness: text-external markup is rendered by underlining selected stretches of text (Annex 2).

The stretches of text corresponding to the investigated S&TP categories were saved in different Excel files corresponding to each S&TP category. This allowed the total number of tokens for each descriptor and the mean length of the annotations to be calculated. The annotations were subsequently analyzed with the KWIC (key words in context) function on CATMA, which displayed the concordance lines associated with a specific tag (see Annex 3 for an example). The concordances were analyzed with an unstructured, bottom-up process “whereby the researcher eyeballs the concordance lines and lets that qualitative holistic judgement form the basis of analysis (Gillings and Mautner 2023, p. 41).

3.5. Limitations

One of this study's limitations concerns researcher bias, since the linguistic investigation was carried out by a single researcher, differently from Semino and Short (2004), which is based on inter-annotator agreement (Artstein 2017), a widely used measure for ensuring annotation reliability.

Some measures were taken to mitigate this issue. This study follows an expert annotator approach (cf. Mahlberg 2013), where a single researcher, familiar with the theoretical framework of the paper, annotates the corpus. This approach aligns with corpus stylistics, which implies manual annotation based on linguistic interpretation (cf. Semino and Short 2004). Given the difficulties encountered with Bangs's writing, manual annotation is necessary, since there are no automated tools specifically meant for corpus stylistics tagging. Furthermore, to attenuate potential subjectivity and errors, annotations were double-checked, and ambiguous cases were marked for later re-assessment. This process can improve reliability despite the absence of other annotators, even though it does not eliminate researcher bias entirely. To make the annotation process manageable for a single researcher, only 8 S&TP categories were investigated. The selection of fewer descriptors was also aimed at strengthening consistency and precision in revisiting annotations.

Limitations were also encountered during corpus building, particularly concerning text distribution and editor bias. The corpus is skewed toward album reviews (Table 3). Despite attempting to collect a more diverse range of texts, the limited available material led to an overrepresentation of album reviews (35 out of 68 texts). This can be connected to Bangs's prolific output in this genre, especially in his first years as a critic (cf. DeRogatis 2001), or to

the limitations of *rocksbackpages.com* as an online archive. The name of the Lester Bangs's webpage editor is unknown, thus making it difficult to exactly pinpoint the incidence of editorial bias, as no information on the selection criteria can be found on the website. Furthermore, a perfectly balanced corpus across text types would have required significant culling. This procedure would have reduced the dataset size, thereby weakening the reliability of the quantitative analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Distribution of descriptors in the corpus

Most frequent ST&P annotations in the corpus				
Descriptor	Number of annotations	Percentage	Total number of tokens	Mean length of annotations (tokens)
Free Direct Speech (FDS)	176	28,85%	6061	34.43
Free Indirect Thought (FIT)	135	22,13%	4170	30.88
Direct Speech (DS)	124	20,32%	5931	47.83
Indirect Thought (IT)	113	18,52%	2569	22.73
Indirect Speech (IS)	44	7,21%	1029	23.29
Free Indirect Speech (FIS)	11	1,80%	221	20.09
Direct Thought (DT)	4	0,65%	65	16.25
Free Direct Thought (FDT)	3	0,49%	66	22
Total	610	100%	20112	27.18

Table 5
Most frequent ST&P descriptors in the corpus.

Table 5 reveals interesting frequency patterns. FDS (28,85%) is more frequent than DS (22,13%), contradicting Semino and Short's observation that "the DS tag is more than twice as frequent as the FDS tag" in their corpus (2004, p. 90). This anomaly might have different explanations. First, Bangs tends to report lyrics verbatim in album reviews, using quotation marks. In these excerpts, he does not use reporting verbs, neither does he

specify the name of the singer (Excerpt 1):

They romp in and play in 'Brothers Together' along the glens and knolls and shady groves "where nature is the greatest thing and the power of beauty is an everyday thing". (Bangs 1972)

Similarly, Bangs does not frequently use reporting clauses in interviews, presumably to create a less mechanical narration. The bolded part in Excerpt 2 shows a rapid verbal exchange between Bangs and Lou Reed, rendered with free direct speech.

Then he takes another glug and machos: "I'm outdrinking you two to one, you know." "Are you proud of yourself?". "Yeah. No, not actually; it's just that a single shot of Scotch is so small that you've gotta nurse it like it's a child or something. I drink constantly". (Bangs 1973)

Perhaps the most interesting pattern, however, is the author's use of ambiguous free direct speech. These instances were at times difficult to distinguish from other S&TP categories, such as FIT and FIS. The key role of this stylistic feature in the creation of Bangs's personas is detailed in 4.2.

The frequent use of FIT and IT is less surprising. The first is commonly used in fiction to explore the narrator's and characters' inner thoughts. Bangs's employment of literary devices in his texts reflects his influences from fiction and Beat prose. Similarly, IT clarifies the narrator's positioning, crucial for music criticism's evaluative nature. While arguably less inventive—since it requires a reporting clause containing a stative verb of thought—IT is an effective window into Bangs's thought-provoking opinions.

FDS, FIT and IT best represent Bangs's idiosyncratic style. Their salient characteristics are explored in the following subsection.

4.2. Formally ambiguous Free Direct Speech (FDS): Bangs's stylistic trademark

FDS is the most frequent descriptor in the corpus. Bangs used FDS to create personas who manifested specific behaviors and beliefs. He crafted these authorial voices by writing long portions of text that mimicked people engaged in monologues and conversations (Excerpts 3 and 4).

There's not too many of those greasy rockers still hanging around from their '50s heydaze good for much more than playing 50 tank towns a year, making asses of themselves on TV talk shows or singing 'Dixie', but I'm pretty sure we can trust Jerry Lee Lewis. (Bangs 1972)

Remember the scene in Lina Wertmüller's *SEVEN BEAUTIES* where the concentration camp inmate commits suicide by swan-diving into a vat of festeringly clotted human excrement approximately the length and depth of Troy's Donahue pool at the La Cienega he owed in the summer of 1963? And all because he would rather drown lungs full of shit than endure one moment of this travesty posing as existence. Well, that's how John Langan told me he felt after hearing this new LP by The Mekons. (Bangs 1982)

Excerpt 3 includes colloquial, denigratory expressions associated with spoken language ("making asses of themselves," "tank towns") and the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we," which involves both the persona and the reader. Excerpt 4 presents imagery aimed at provoking disgust and directly addresses the reader ("Remember[...]?"). Excerpt 4 is also syntactically complex, presenting several coordinate and subordinate phrases.

Excerpts 3 and 4 were annotated with the FDS tag since they omit the reporting clause and emulate spoken language. Nonetheless, Semino and Short argue that FDS "usually involves the presence of quotation marks" (2004, p. 92). Furthermore, they state that FDS is commonly found in "long stretches of conversation [that] make it difficult for readers to keep track of the identity of the speakers" (*ibid.*, p. 92). Although not featuring inverted commas, the reader perceives a single narrative voice. We may not know the identity of the persona, but the writer unmistakably presents a single person's utterance.

These features may cause confusion with FIS. FIS blends the characteristics of DS and IS (Semino and Short 2004). It does not require quotation marks, and the text sequences resemble spoken language, aligning with the characteristics in Excerpts 3 and 4. However, FIS is associated with a narrator reporting on the speech of others. For this reason, this category normally features the past tense because the narrator reports speech after it is uttered. Excerpts 3 and 4 portray "synchronic" spoken material, and Bangs identifies himself with the narrator persona.

Excerpts 3 and 4 might be considered Bangs's thoughts on Jerry Lee Lewis and The Mekons, thus likely to be categorized as thought presentation stretches, like FDT and FIT. Nonetheless, FDT is accompanied by a stative verb representing thought, while FIT is usually presented with long stretches of text in the past tense, where the relationship between speech and thought remains latent (Cohn 1978). Excerpts 3 and 4 do not involve thought verbs, hinting, on the contrary, at spoken material. Consequently, they adhere better to the FDS category.

Bangs's idiosyncratic FDS sequences provide answers to the first and second research questions (3.1.). FDS appears to be Bangs's preferred strategy to create personas in his texts. The manipulation of this stylistic feature hints at two constants in Bangs's production: the creation of personas and the subjective first-person immersion advocated by *New Journalism*. He

did so by concealing himself behind personas. Bangs could be the contrarian, denouncing the commodification of rock 'n' roll (Excerpt 3), or the boisterous music critic, who was not afraid to use squalid imagery (Excerpt 4).

FDS also provides insight into Bangs's discourses about music and culture. The author condemned rock and punk's loss of edge, adopting the harsh or self-deprecating critic persona. Simultaneously, he acted as an enthusiastic, lewd fan when he liked a band. The following excerpts exemplify these different facets of Bangs's personas:

But I digress. But I wonder if you know how easy it is to digress from a Captain and Tennille review. [...] On the contrary, I'm so jaded from hearing 39 identical punk bands in a row (and I even buy 'em! Imports!) that I'm predisposed – let's face it, I WANT – to like the Captain and Tennille. (Bangs 1977)

Don't let anybody tell you, ever again, that rock and roll is people's music – rock and roll is \$8,50 a ticket for Bob Seger, and there is an elite, and so what? (Bangs 1976) – issued on *Creem*

Also, I am sick of those guys' [the band Kiss] weltanschauung; they should stop singing about fucking, which is nobody else's business anyway, and get down to topical consciousness-raising a la Black Sabbath. (Bangs 1977)

If you never like another San Francisco album after Moby Grape's first, I still guarantee that this album will tickle your synapses and convey all the unstrained intellectual excitement that any music should have.

And if you've ever heard even one lick of Dave's guitar work you're sold on Foghat, because he's brilliant and he's passed it on to them. If you haven't heard Dave try this album anyway in which blues and rock fuck righteously enough to call for nuptials [...] (Bangs 1972)

Excerpt 5 shows self-deprecating humor and sarcasm. The author is aware of the commodification of punk ("39 identical punk bands in a row") but does not seem capable of protesting it. Instead, he employs hyperbole and sarcasm to make fun of his own behavior ("I'm so jaded"; "and I even buy them!").

In Excerpt 6, Bangs complains about rising ticket prices for rock concerts, which became mainstream events in the 1970s (see Frith 1981). He does so by addressing the reader directly and frankly. As his colleague Robert

Christgau noted, Bangs wanted to keep “alive the dream of insurrectionary rock and roll” (1982).

His criticism of Kiss (Excerpt 7) reflects Bangs’s ideals. He negatively evaluates Kiss’s lyrics about sex using a colloquial expression (“I am sick of those guys”) while advocating for more consciousness-raising rock music, citing the band Black Sabbath as an example.

Excerpts 8 and 9 show two different sides of Bangs’s enthusiastic evaluations, linked by a personal and subjective tone. In Excerpt 8, he merges high and low registers (“tickle your synapses,” “convey all the unstrained intellectual excitement that any music should have”). In contrast, he embodies the juvenile fan in Excerpt 9, offering a positive yet smutty evaluation of Foghat (“in which blues and rock fuck righteously enough to call for nuptials”).

FDS can thus be considered the main strategy that Bangs used to craft his literary personas. The colloquial register seen throughout the excerpts, together with the spontaneous, free-flowing, and unfiltered use of language, made the articles seem earnest and trustworthy. These characteristics allowed readers to identify with the author, making them more likely to agree with Bangs’s opinions on music and culture. Table 6 exemplifies the *persona* types found in these excerpts:

Persona types	
Type	Excerpt
Disillusioned critic	3, 5, 6
Lewd provocateur	4
Lewd contrarian	7
Enthusiastic, juvenile fan	8, 9

Table 6
Types of *personas* enacted by Lester Bangs.

4.3. Bangs’s discourses about music through (Free) Indirect Thought

As discussed in 4.2., it was sometimes difficult to discern FDS from FIT, since they present similarities in the corpus. Considering this, there are two main distinctive features in Bangs’s FIT sequences. In his essays and reviews, he sometimes adopts the point of view of the artists under scrutiny, picturing their inner thoughts. In addition, depending on contextual information, Bangs’s personas shift their focus to inward reflection. This latter strategy can be followed by IT, which demonstrates how Bangs reflected on the discourses surrounding the music he listened to. The following excerpts exemplify these strategies:

By now she was writing a body of originals; she'd never again have to endure the all but hopeless search for other composers attuned to her ethos. (Bangs 1971)

I'm not trying to denigrate Alice Cooper's abilities: within the context of their self-imposed limitations, the album is listenable. But there is a way to do these things. I think simplicity and the imaginative use of the cliché are at the essence of rock; but the clichés have to hit you in a certain way [...] to spark that certain internal combustion of good feeling and galvanized energies. (Bangs 1969)

Excerpt 10 starts with a presentation of writing. Even though the stylistic category is not relevant to the investigation, it effectively sets the scene: Bangs pictured the German songwriter *Nico* during her creative process. After the semicolon, the author imagines how she felt at the time, using FIT. Notwithstanding the absence of a reporting clause, the reader gets an idea of Nico's perceived sense of freedom after the "all-but-hopeless search" she endured when recording her previous albums. Bangs here acts as an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator (Genette 1980) who is aware of the events and feelings in the character's life (i.e., Nico). Put differently, Bangs sets his persona aside to let Nico express her feelings. In addition, Excerpt 10 is in the past tense, one of the key features of FIT according to Semino and Short.

Although a more ambiguous FIT sequence, Excerpt 11 provides further insight into Bangs's discourses on rock music. Instead of emulating a conversation with the reader, Bangs self-evaluates his opinion of *Alice Cooper* ("I'm not trying to denigrate Alice Cooper's abilities"). This might be considered FIT. Bangs states something he thinks, and no reporting clause is used. The sentence is in the present tense because Bangs reports the thoughts of the narrator/journalist as they happen. The stative nature of this excerpt is made clearer with the third sentence, which clearly features IT. It starts with a reporting clause ("I think") and explicitly contains the author's opinion on rock music.

From a discursive standpoint, Excerpt 11 is particularly interesting. It was published in 1969, when Bangs had just started writing for *Rolling Stone*. Two clear sides to his persona can be seen. The first is the reflective yet opinionated critic, who expresses his contrasting feelings on rock music. Bangs would further develop this narrative voice in his *Village Voice* articles. Furthermore, good rock music is represented as a genre that involves "good feeling and galvanized energy" in this excerpt. This once again proves that, for Lester Bangs, grit and honesty were the core of all rock 'n' roll (Jones and Featherly 2002), and he would defend this view up until his death in 1982.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper analyzed and contextualized the stylistic and discursive features of Lester Bangs's production, shedding light on his literary personas. The research questions were centered on seven S&TP categories.

Bangs frequently employed FDS, a thought-provoking finding that differs from Semino and Short's analysis. The author used FDS to report lyrics and exchanges in interviews with quotation marks. However, he also manipulated this presentation category to create his personas. By directly addressing the reader and deploying features of spoken language, Bangs mimics the self-loathing provocateur, the reflective critic, and the immature yet overtly enthusiastic fan.

His explicit attitude is counterbalanced by his use of FIT and IT, which give the reader insight into Lester Bangs's thoughts. Bangs also uses FIT to craft quasi-literary narrations, in which he portrays an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator. His rendition of Nico's creative process, his somewhat composed reflection on Alice Cooper, and his remarks on the value of good rock music emphasize his authorial complexities. While enthusiastic and chaotic at times, Bangs's writing was passionate and eloquent.

The stylistic features found in Chapter 4 are a consequence of Bangs's literary and journalistic influences. Subjectivity, first-person immersion, and seamless shifts in register were inspired by Tom Wolfe's *New Journalism*; the "musical" vitality and provocative edge of his texts were inspired by *Beat* prose, particularly Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs.

This paper aims to enrich the understanding of Lester Bangs as a pivotal author in the music press, an understudied topic that has been gaining attention in cultural studies and linguistics in recent years (e.g., Grafe and McKeown 2024). However, many of Lester Bangs's idiosyncrasies as a writer must still be unearthed. Further insight can be gained into the presentation of writing to investigate how Bangs relates to the activity he devoted himself to until his premature death. Additionally, the author tried to bridge the gap between writing and music by representing sounds in his writings. Analyzing this aspect can provide further insight into the narrator's representation of voice. Writing about sounds might involve a broad range of stylistic and rhetorical strategies, which could further enrich the discussion on the use of corpus stylistics.

Popular music creates powerful discourses (Van Leeuwen 2012). Music journalists address them, providing insightful commentary. Therefore, they create discourses about musical discourse, which are not only aesthetic, but also ideological in nature, given the prominent cultural relevance of popular music in Western society (Tagg 1982). Furthermore, this understudied area offers the opportunity to employ interdisciplinary approaches based on applied linguistics, cultural and media studies, and

musicology.

Bangs's tragic fate and his multifaceted writings offer valuable insight into these types of discourse, which shaped contemporary music, as well as portraying music journalism as a unique, genre-defying writing style.

Bionote: Gilberto Giannacchi is a PhD student at the University of Insubria. He also attended King's College London as a Visiting PhD Student from November 2024 to May 2025. He specialises in corpus-assisted discourse studies. His primary research interest lies in the diachronic discourses of popular music criticism, especially those contained in album reviews published by the British and American music press. His PhD thesis focuses on this topic, seeking to provide a diachronic account (1980-2022) of the discursive and evaluative features adopted by pop critics. Giannacchi has published two peer-reviewed pilot studies based on the contents of his PhD thesis. His other research interests include news discourses about workplace trends (quiet quitting) and historical linguistics. Giannacchi is also a collaborator for the *Progetto di Ricerca di Interesse Nazionale* (PRIN) "Discourses and Contexts of Well-being in the History of English".

Author's address: ggiannacchi@uninsubria.it

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Annexes

Tagsets			
Tagsets	Tags	Properties	Values
SW&TP categories (Semino ...			
	▼ Speech		
	Indirect Speech (IS)		
	Free Indirect Speech (FIS)		
	Free Direct Speech (FDS)	► Ambiguity,	
	Direct Speech (DS)		
	▼ Thought		
	Free Direct Thought (FDT)		
	Indirect Thought (IT)		
	Free Indirect Thought (FIT)		
	Direct Thought (DT)		

Annex 1
Tagsets used in CATMA 7.1.

Hanging out all by myself
Cause I don't want to be with anybody else
I just want to be with you
I just want to have something to do
Tonight.

I DON'T suppose I really have to tell most readers of this
magazine that those lyrics are not only about something, but
vitaly relevant.

You know how great the Ramones are. But sadly there is a world out
there which remains unconvinced. So why don't you just bear with
me and play devil's advocate for a moment; pretend you're a moron,
a moron who doesn't even know, that the Ramones are the greatest
rock'n'roll band in America, who thinks their music is just a
bunch of shit and their lyrics about absolutely nothing.

To you, idiot, I will tell the following story:

Once or twice a year, I revisit my erstwhile stomping rounds in
Detroit, and when I do, I always stay at the home of Rob Tyner, of
the MCS. A little over a year ago, I happened to notice that his
eight-year-old son, Robin, was getting on this Fonzie kick, saying
things like, "Hey dad, do you think I could ever get just a bunch
of guys to hang out with and do stuff?"

Collection currently being edited
{{title}} Default Annotations

Tagsets			
Tagsets	Tags	Properties	Values
SW&TP ca...	► Speech,Thought		👁

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ANALYZE

Annex 2
Annotation interface in CATMA 7.1.

KeyWord In Context				
Document	Collection	Left Context	Keyword	Right Context
Rory Gallagher: Rory ...	{{title}} Default Anno...		RORY GALLAGHER[...]o they know?	Well, something about the
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	kept babbling about ...	until I finally[...]itical act?"	"Well," he
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	a political act?"	"Well," he sez [...] I guess so."	"Hmm, that's very
Valerie Carter: Just A ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	) and Jackson Browne.	That shouldn't [...]you a star.	On the other hand,
The Eagles: How The ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	people by using her ...	and telling abs[...]est friend!"	The Eagles are her favourite
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	I guess so."	"Hmm, that's ve[...]riving 'em."	"It is,"
The Eagles: How The ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	are her favourite gro...	and one day her[...] about you."	"I know,"
The Eagles: How The ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	is about you."	"I know," said [...] melancholy,	I recite this anecdote not
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	driving 'em."	"It is," he sta[...]way around."	"Wow, have I
Nils Lofgren: I Came ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	of little white lies.	"What I am is a[...]ood or bad."	Rather than the archetypal punk
Amon Düül (I & II): A...	{{title}} Default Anno...	heard in the Western...	since Molly too[...] yes I will."	And the first with the
The Ramones: Ramo...	{{title}} Default Anno...	on this Fonzie kick,	saying things I[...]d do stuff?"	He didn't know the word
Slade: Cum On Feel ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	panties thrown at him.	Noddy picks up [...]C. Not bad."	He works the crowd masterfully
The Mekons: The Me...	{{title}} Default Anno...	LP by the Mekons.	"I must give it up" he wailed	, knocking over his bottle
Nico: A Kind Of Froze...	{{title}} Default Anno...	first a similar device,	but now Lou Ree[...]ul love song"	, as sincere as '
John Prine: The Trou...	{{title}} Default Anno...	mediocre, almost am...	He joked at one[...]n the world.	The trouble was that the
Suicide: The Sound o...	{{title}} Default Anno...	what little he had,	and the first t[...]hit of acid?"	When I politely declined,

Annex 3

Direct Speech (DS) concordance lines on CATMA 7.1.