INTERVIEW

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**A honeycomb of opinion: An interview with Jeanette Leech**

**ABSTRACT**

Jeanette Leech is a writer, researcher, DJ, and music historian who contributes regularly to magazines including *fRoots* and *Shindig!.* She also writes extensively in the health and social care fields. Her first book about music, *Seasons They change* (2010), a history of acid folk, was widely praised as 'an engaging celebration of music from the fringes.' Her new book, *Fearless* (2017), is subtitled 'the making of post-rock'. She lives in Canterbury, England.

**KEYWORDS**

Jeanette Leech

post-rock

rock

dub-space

Talk Talk

experimental

By the time I'd finished the thirty pages that comprise the first chapter of Jeanette Leech's *Fearless* (2017), I knew I was going to enjoy it. Jeanette Leech quickly lays a foundation for her book and the notion of post-rock, looking back to Ornette Coleman and then following threads of influence, difference and response through Lou Reed, AMM, the Red Crayola, progrock, Bark Psychosis, Tortoise, krautrock, Can, Amon Düül, Eno, Bowie, Joy Division, The Police, The Durutti Column, PiL, dub, Lee Perry, Scritti Politti, Dif Juz, Chorchozade and Sonic Youth, the last acting as a bridge and link to chapter 2 which moves to New York.

Leech is sharp-witted and intelligent, and writes a flowing, easy-to-read prose that facilitates the twists and turns and diversions she pursues throughout time and music. I love the eclectic gathering of music in chapter 1, love that it introduced me to a band I've never heard of (Chorchozade) and had me asking 'really?' and checking that Andy Summers really did play for Soft Machine. (Yup, he did.) I've also never heard anyone suggest that The Police, *sans* vocals, could be listened to as dubbed-out post-rock rather than old musos jumping on the new-wave bandwagon! (I'm not convinced.)

The diversity of music discussed, the web of musical, geographical and conceptual ideas is a constant throughout this amazing volume. The likes of the cacophonous Swans and the art-rock experiment of Sonic Youth are discussed alongside the quiet, drumless Hugo Largo, all in relation to Glenn Branca's slabs of guitar compositions. The wonderful UT, who I remember seeing at Riverside Studios, show up too, as do the No Wave bands and, of course, Eno, who curated an LP of the movement. Somehow Public Enemy get included here, too – again, an interesting and provocative yet well-reasoned inclusion, which is also used to highlight the arrival of samplers in the music biz.

And so it continues, ducking and diving through the music, all the way through to the early 2000s, by which time, Leech argues, the term 'post-rock' no longer means anything. If at times I found the pages devoted to the likes of My Bloody Valentine and A.R. Kane not of much interest (I find both bands unlistenable), I enjoyed reading about Talk Talk, David Sylvian, Moonshake, Seefeel and Tortoise as well as many other bands I missed hearing at the time. Again, the points of connection are clearly made, across genres, record labels, lines of influence and resistance.

# Negatives? Beyond some bands I'd have liked to have seen in there (Dub Sex and Rip, Rig & Panic, for instance), there's little downside to this volume. I'm surprised there are no links back to industrial and post-punk music (Nurse with Wound get a brief mention in relation to Stereolab), who seem clear predecessors to much of this this music, surprised that Leech mentions alt-folk as much as she does (obviously, this is one of Leech's musical interests) and drum'n'bass so little, and genuinely appalled that the book ends, in a chapter focussed on the marvellous bands Sigur Ros, Godpseed You Black Emperor! and their associates, by devoting several pages to the musical abomination that is Radiohead.

However, that aside, *Fearless* is a fascinating read as group after group tries to work their way around the obvious tropes of 'rock', deconstructing and reinventing it over and over again. Rhythm, texture, content, harmonics, the studio as an instrument, improvisation and editing, sampling, the nature of music and sound itself, are all questioned time and time again. Leech's title is apt: these musicians were fearless, and in being so made some of the most interesting music at the end of the 20th century. I wanted to discuss the book with her.

**RL:** You seem a little sceptical about the term 'post-rock' throughout *Fearless.* What made you decide to run with it in the end?

**JL:** I came to feel like a lot of the bands did about the term ‘post-rock’ – that there was good intention to it, but it had mutated and been defiled over the years. I knew I didn’t want to accept it as a label uncritically, but neither did I want to dismiss all the interesting, positive facets of the term. It was all a *really* long thinking process to understand what it meant to me, as well as triangulating what it meant to all the artists I interviewed. As I was going through, I toyed with putting the term in brackets, with losing the hyphen, with using inverted commas… but all those were really annoying to read! In the end, there were two things I did to express my contradictory feelings. One was the subtitle: ‘the *making* of post-rock’. Post-rock was much, much more than a journalistic shorthand, and I wanted to explore that properly. The other way I expressed my own reservations and contradictory feelings was in the short introduction.

**RL:** Did Simon Reynolds really coin the phrase post-rock? How influential was his *Blissed Out* (1990) book for you? It's up there for me, along with David Toop's *Ocean of Sound* (1995) and the works of Greil Marcus.

**JL:** My own favourite Simon Reynolds book is *Rip It Up And Start Again* (2005), in fact I consider it one of the best music books ever written. I admire Reynolds for his mental mapping abilities as well as his prose style, and the way he developed the concept of ‘post-rock’ is a good example of Reynolds at his best. He really did coin the phrase (as we know it; the words had been used before, elsewhere, meaning slightly different things). I got my hands on pretty much all of his *Melody Maker* and *Wire* writing of the late 1980s and 1990s (some of which is also in *Blissed Out*), and I felt he was clearly grasping for a few years to hit upon something snappy to describe the phenomena he heard around him. He started off by coupling ‘post-rock’ with ‘post-techno’, and included artists like Aphex Twin in his purview, but by the time he got to exploring the concept fully, the ‘post-techno’ bit had been dropped.

**RL:** I loved the way you weave a web of different musicians, and indeed musics, in chapter 1 as a kind of baseline for post-rock. Did you have other versions of this or are you adamant that this is where post-rock comes from?

**JL:** Ha! I’m glad you like it, because chapter one took agesand agesto write and it was a very delicate balancing act. Parts of it I *am* adamant about – for instance Ornette Coleman and then The Velvet Underground as two foundation stones – but otherwise, it’s a honeycomb of opinion that takes in everything from the Durutti Column to Frankie Goes To Hollywood. There are so many things that go into post-rock and I felt there were heaps of artists who embodied one aspect of post-rock really well, and I wanted to explore that. For example, AMM were really significant precursors for their lack of hierarchy and challenge to the traditional idea of what a group was. PiL are another good example, for seriously using dub music in a rock context – post-rock is very keen on using dub space. Actually, I’m probably adamant about Can being a canonical proto- band too – I don’t think there’s a post-rock artist in the world that doesn’t like them.

**RL:** Talk Talk seem to crop up a lot. Do you think they are really as important as everyone makes out, or is just an easy point of reference? I mean, those last two albums of their's are great, but it could be argued they are still full of pop and rock references.

**JL:** Absolutely. I think it’s a strength of Talk Talk that they never completely lost that pop sensibility, and Mark Hollis was really aware of this – that’s why he reflected earlier track titles like ‘Renee’ and ‘Mirror Man’ in *Laughing Stock*’s ‘Runeii’ and ‘Myrrhman’ (1991). Yep, I’m going to stand up unequivocally for Talk Talk’s importance. Very different post-rock bands – Bark Psychosis, Rachel’s, Do Make Say Think – all adored Talk Talk so that would be enough for them to have a central place in my narrative. But it’s more than that. It’s something about the meticulousness, and their attitude of taking out rather than putting in: that’s *very* post-rock. I really wish I could have spoken to Mark Hollis, but he hasn’t done an interview for decades – his prerogative of course. He *really* hated being interviewed and some articles are just painful to read. Most journalists still loved the miserable old goat, though! *Smash Hits* said Mark Hollis looked like ‘a complete shambles, but keeps writing truly excellent songs’ (XXXX).

**RL:** I enjoyed your previous book a lot, and was surprised to find folk slipping in around the edges of this one. How important do you think that acoustic blues and ideas of 'authenticity' were to post-rock?

**JL:** Not at all in the UK, but there were some links in the US. I write in *Fearless* about John Fahey – he really prodded the notions of folk and blues ‘authenticity’ with his fabricated sleevenotes and invented characters. He was a hero to many American post-rock artists like Cul de Sac (who worked with him, in a not altogether happy experience) and Jim O’Rourke; Thurston Moore has also claimed Fahey’s unconventional tunings were a big influence on early Sonic Youth. Probably if I hadn’t already written *Seasons They Change* I might have slipped in material on Tim Buckley and the free-folk he inspired, artists like The Tower Recordings, who really did deconstruct what folk music meant; it was a very post-rock attitude they had, albeit a lot more hippy and longhaired. But I didn’t want to repeat myself!

**RL:** I was surprised how little reference you made to industrial/experimental music or post-punk. Aren't these the obvious predecessors to post-rock?

**JL:** Well… yes they are in some senses, but I found that was a bit of a rabbit hole, taking up a lot of valuable space when it’s been covered so well elsewhere. I tried to draw links, most notably with Joy Division and PiL, and I think I mention Zoviet France and Throbbing Gristle in a later chapter too when looking at ‘isolationism’, but covering those artists in detail would have shifted the focus a little bit too much. In an earlier draft of chapter one, I wrote on This Heat and The Cure’s 'Carnage Visors' (1981); but when you’re writing a book, usually you get a feel for when you’re drifting off the point a bit too much, and losing the tightness of structure. So I took those bits out. What I lost in discussing some cool and important records, I gained in pace and readability, I think.

**RL:** And what about free jazz and improvisation? Isn't the editing and mixing together of segments of live rehearsal, jams and computer composition a link to these things?

**JL**: It is in one sense, and I was interested in was how this was done in a rock context – hence the inclusion of AMM and Can. Talk Talk were infamous for recording hours upon hours of material and using seconds of it. But there was also a very different attitude in some bands, which was definitely *not* about improvisation. If you look up some of the rehearsal footage of Slint when they were developing *Spiderland* (1991) it is not improvisational at *all* – they don’t play around, they repeated and tightened those songs for months and months to pinpoint brilliance. When I did write about jazz in *Fearless* I found the best guide to the music was the work of Valerie Wilmer. She’s an amazing writer who really finds the human side in jazz, and I related to her work a lot. It reflected how I tried to approach the subject of post-rock – away from a strictly muso approach and much more about the warmth, the stories, and the context of the music. Both jazz and post-rock have a reputation as impenetrable, and I hope I challenged that a little in *Fearless*.

**RL:** I taught a Writing Lyrics module for several years, which also discussed technologies and how they can change ideas of composition and dissemination. You pick up on the hand-crafted element of CD sleeves at one point, and the arrival of samplers changing things at another, yet barely touch upon the arrival of MP3 and Napster. Is this change in how we obtain and store music part of why your book stops in the very early 2000s?

**JL:** I am conscious that I dodged a bullet there. I’d add to your point that it was not only the change in formatting away from physical product, but also the democratisation of recording that resulted in huge gluts of music being made and ‘released’ (plopped online). The changes that occurred in the noughties were *so* seismic, and to some extent the artists who did keep going after *Fearless* ended resisted the death knell they heard for physical products. Constellation Records, for example, didn’t have digital copies of their artists’ back catalogues for official sale for a long while, and were sure to keep all the vinyl available, all the time (which they still do). To an extent, their attitude has been vindicated, as many people now either stream or buy vinyl, while the market for buying downloads is nearly as dead as that for CDs. There is a very strong link between aesthetics and music in post-rock, with some gorgeous tactile sleeves, and I think artists are understandably reluctant to lose that. One June Of 44 album even came in a hand-seared wooden box! One thing you can say about post-rock people is they weren’t lazy. But to answer your question, no it wasn’t the prime reason my book stopped when it did – it was because I felt post-rock had locked anchor and most of the interesting developments had stopped, and because many of its aspects had gone mainstream with artists like Radiohead and even Coldplay – but I am somewhat relieved that I got away with not writing *too* much about all those difficult and destabilising issues you mention.

**RL:** I always perceived drum'n'bass as an intelligent riposte to the inanities of rave culture. People like Peshay and Amon Tobin seemed to combine synthesized and deconstructed glitch with computer music and jazz. I think late Seefeel, for instance aren't very different from this music, although it's more awkward and electronic. You don't quite see it in quite the same way? Or did you have to limit the links of association and influence for the book?

**JL:** I have thought about this quite a lot. When the original crop of British post-rock bands broke up, fell out, moved on, gave up – which I talk about in Chapter 8 – the salvageable wreckage was mainly electronic. Bark Psychosis’s Graham Sutton became Boymerang and moved into drum ‘n’ bass so that’s a very direct example of the link, and Seefeel replaced the wooziness and fleshy qualities of their first album *Quique* (1993) with harsh electronic despair on their second album, *Succour* (1995), which was released on Warp. But I do see it slightly differently. Although I despise the term IDM (I think it’s snobbish and as *if* amazing tracks like De’Lacy’s ‘Hideaway’ (1995) or Grace’s ‘Not Over Yet’ (1995) aren’t intelligent) the idea that dance music is for more than dancing is important and I tried to touch on that with – for example – Oval and Autechre. The Germans, actually, were pretty amazing at interweaving post-rock and dance; the early Pluramon and To Rococo Rot records are brilliant in this regard. And I’m going to disagree with you slightly, and say that rave culture fed into it all, too – the idea of transcendence – which in a weird way parallels some of the things Alice Coltrane was exploring!

**RL:** If I haven't said I greatly enjoyed *Fearless*. Is there another area or type of music you re considering for a future writing project? Perhaps something to do with new folk or alt-folk?

JL: Thank you very much. At the moment I’m having a rest from the big project stuff while I consider my options. Writing a book for me is wonderful, but it is also enormously draining and that’s why *Seasons They Change* and *Fearless* were published seven years apart! But I will be back… in some form or other.

RL: Thanks for the book and for your time.

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**

Loydell, R. (20xx), 'A honeycomb of opinion: An interview with Jeanette Leech', *Punk & Post-Punk, x.x, pp. xxx-xxx,*

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